I compiled each chapter of The Distortion Detective web novel purely for my convenience.

I've shared it online with the intent of bringing that convenience to the greater Project Moon community.

This EPUB is a 1 to 1 copy of the web novel available on www.postype.com, including translation notes.

Some Hangul and Hanja were removed.

Enjoy.

Chapter 1: I Can See the Distortion.

1. Cause / 2. Explanation / 3. Understanding / 4. Acknowledgement

I can see the Distortion, and the Distortion can occur to anyone. I don't exactly know who coined the term "Distortion" for the phenomenon, but people just started calling it that at some point. No one knows how it works, but the experience so far suggests that this phenomenon is a manifestation of strong emotional desires and explosive surges of feelings.

'The Pianist', who, or rather which wreaked havoc on District 9, is known as one of the most notable cases of the Distortion. Not many are aware that smaller cases of the Distortion are happening here and there across the City even now. A person turning into a fish and another one's eyes being dyed with the hues of the sky are two such examples.

The Distortion appears to me as visual distortions in a literal sense. Although I can see them, they aren't tangible; in the case of the person whose upper body gradually turned into that of a fish, I could clearly observe scales growing on their body, yet when I touched their skin, I could only feel the soft sensation of a normal human's skin. Hearing this much, one might think the Distortion is merely an illusion. Well, that would mean I'm simply delusional and suffering from

hallucinations, however, I've taken up this job because that is not the case.

I am chasing after the Distortion. It's secretive yet explicit, and it proceeds slowly. For example, the fish person I mentioned earlier, who was dubbed the 'Merfolk', underwent gradual changes such as having their eyes protrude, gills appear, and scales grow out of their skin. When their upper body almost completely morphed into the form of a fish, the change physically manifested in a moment's notice. Only then could others see what had become of the 'Merfolk', and physically feel the fishy features of their body.

The 'Merfolk' (Case #5) was originally a villager in District 19's fishing hamlet who was subject to constant abuse. It seemed that they spent most of their time staring into the great lake, yearning to escape from their current life. My conclusion is that they desired to be free from their agonies and saw the lake as a getaway, and that strong longing for water ultimately distorted them into the 'Merfolk'. Of course, there are many other complicated factors involved, but I'll omit the details since the Merfolk is not the main subject of my story.

My work is to look out for cases of the Distortion and prevent them. In fact, the progress of the Distortion varies for each person. Ever since I gained this ability to see omens of the Distortion with my eyes, I cannot see a single person who is not distorted in one way or another.

Once again, I don't have a deeper understanding of the phenomenon or anything. I simply started seeing it one day, and could notice it earlier than others. Since I can see the signs in advance, I do my best

to warn people to take preventative measures before it manifests. That is my job.

I was hired by a firm that had lost several of its staff to the so-called ‘Ascension Incident’, and sought out the employees whose eyes were filled with the sky’s colors. The firm advised them to wear sunglasses. The idea to give them sunglasses so that they couldn’t keep the scenery of the sky in their eyes was so outlandish, it made me chuckle. The sky no longer being blue for them didn’t have much positive impact on their boring lives, but at least they didn’t evaporate anymore.

The people who used to look up at the sky started looking down instead. Perhaps they still wanted to get closer to the sky by going up to the rooftop, or maybe they were just one of the many who chose to jump to death. The City isn’t too interested in what happens after a case has been solved. All they need to know is if the deaths were understandable or not. I’m not a charity worker, so I don’t bother looking into cases of the Distortion I wasn’t asked to investigate, either.

Case #13 - ‘Balloon People’

This case was rather… explosive. I titled this case ‘Balloon People’ because people’s heads quite literally expanded like balloons until they went pop. This cold explosion would cover everything within a 10m radius with blood and blow to pieces everyone in its range as well. A company in O Corp’s Nest finally asked for my help after suffering five instances of those ‘Balloon People’. After some investigation, I found out that all occurrences of this Distortion had one thing in common: they all worked in the service industry.

To interpret a Distortion, you need to combine multiple pieces of

evidence. This process consists of four steps: cause, explanation, understanding, and acknowledgement. First, investigate the possible causes of the Distortion, and construct a clear explanation that covers the casual relationship in a convincing manner. Then make the subject understand why they are going through the Distortion, and have them acknowledge that they could fully distort at this rate. If all of these steps succeed, the case is closed. The Distortion is considered "solved" if the subject regresses to a form that looks human enough to me.

Those who became the 'Balloon People' used to work in emotionally intense fields such as delivery carriers, nurses, and call center clerks. Particularly, call center clerks had the largest average explosion radius of 16 meters. Some inquiries revealed that another company had subcontracted all customer service calls to one call center. The clerks' job was to record the claims from clients and send those records to that company. The problem lay in this process. The call center clerks lacked any expertise in the subjects of those complaints, yet they had to endure heaps of insults from their clients, even though there was no use lashing out at them. The clerks were treated like emotional garbage cans, hearing all kinds of abusive language and even threats from clients.

Service workers are compelled to put on a smile and a cheery voice while being a punching bag for others, having no way to vent out their own distress. Such stress would naturally accumulate over time. This resulted in their heads inflating like balloons, all the while they maintained a facade of serenity. They'd end up exploding once their stress reached a breaking point. From that point, my work is simple. I made a list of clerks whose heads appeared inflated to me and sent that to the company. Those clerks then lost their jobs. The company didn't bother investing any time or effort into shrinking their heads; my work often ends before I can enter the stages of "understanding" and

“acknowledgement”.

Simply interpreting the Distortion doesn’t resolve the fundamental issue. Their stress is bound to explode in one way or another, however, such matters didn’t concern my clients much. All they cared about was maintaining this abnormal status quo and evading responsibility for the Distortion, not the cause behind it. I suppose the same can be said of me. I can’t help but keep thinking that we are all missing something important. I believe I’ll be chasing after the Distortion for a while, as every single thing appears distorted to my eyes.

Right now I am looking into a mirror. To my eyes, I’m the only one who doesn’t appear distorted. In a world full of distorted people, could the one person who remains unchanged be the “distorted” one? As I look at all the distorted people, the distorted streets, and this distorted City, I come to think that maybe the whole world is distorted. I can’t fathom what would happen once the distortion of this world continues and reaches a critical point.
Until then, I’ll stay ever vigilant for the Distortion. I am the Distortion Detective.

Chapter 2: Self-Contradiction

Moses and Ezra

“You idiot…”

I quietly murmured, grinding my teeth. Ezra had done it again. I told her numerous times not to ask sensitive questions to the subjects of the Distortion. Ezra then whispered to me.

“Uwaaaaaa… Detective! Detective! What do we do?!”

“Hahaha, sorry chef. My niece isn’t very streetwise yet, you see! Oh, you lovely young sprout~ What do you mean with “detective”? Are you seeing stuff again? Poor little thing...”

“...Hmph, so you were just a couple of nutjobs. If you disrupt my business with bollocks again, I’m gonna call security!”

The master chef yelled. Although this restaurant was too small and shabby for such luxurious titles...

“Yes~ I’ll teach my little gal here to behave~!

...Are you insane? Did you really have to say out loud ‘Wow~ The food here is just as disgusting as the sanitation! Who taught you to cook?’ in a small restaurant that’s not seeing too many guests?”

“But it really did taste horrible…”

“You think we’re here to enjoy the food? You’re supposed to carefully

look around for clues. Just cram the food in your mouth before the chef finds us suspicious."

"This food has got to be the cause of the disappearance. I bet the revolting taste drove them crazy and made them wander off."

"I'm cutting your salary."

"Wha?!

"By 25%."

"Uwahhh, detective! Please!"

I took a pipe out of my inner coat pocket. The case may be stuck for the moment, but it should end well somehow. With such optimism, I started smoking. I'm a Fixer from District 14, a decently experienced Grade 5 currently working for Seven, the association specializing in intelligence and investigation operations. I solve mysteries for a living, though most of these "unsolved" cases are about the Distortion anyway. The City still seems to be mostly clueless about the Distortion; I simply jumped into this budding niche earlier than others thanks to my cursed talent: seeing people's distortions.

"So, what did the chef look like to you, detective?"

"The lower half of their body was that of a snake. And hands were attached on its tail...s. It had about seven tails if I remember correctly."

“Eugh~ What about their upper body? Was it human?”

“Yep. I could see a human in a filthy chef’s uniform.”

“Does that mean the Distortion has progressed by about half? Maybe it’ll manifest in a week or so…”

“It could very well happen tonight, judging from the circumstances. The mouth on one of the tails was salivating and twitching quite intensely.”

“Anyway, we’re dealing with a reptilian, right? Let’s see… A Stigma Workshop product could work!”

“You always pick expensive gadgets.”

The pattern of the Distortion has been changing lately. The manifestations are getting faster. No, to be precise, the Distortion has started to manifest even while people are unconscious. That’s right, their bodies distort in their sleep. This seems to happen with the people who are half-distorted from what I can see. A sloppy monster can only cause sloppy trouble.

The Zwei Association gave my Office a request. People have been disappearing at night inside a certain hotel in the area the association has been safeguarding. Recording was forbidden in the Backstreets of District 14, so there’s no video footage available. The hotel only has two entrances: the main gate, and the backdoor through the kitchen. None of the missing guests were seen leaving through the main gate. The hotel wasn’t assaulted by a Syndicate, either, which was obvious considering that the Zwei were in charge of that area.

“Detective, detective. Maybe something’s really up with the kitchen?“

“Its chef was the most distorted person around, so it’s plausible.”

The sun sets and night falls. We infiltrated the hotel restaurant. The ‘Fairy’ I spent a fortune on enters the keyhole and opens the door for us. Sometimes, Singularities feel much more like monsters than the half-baked creatures born from the Distortion.

“Wow~ Are they having a party or something?”

“What are they eating?”

Under a red light, skinless hunks of flesh were sitting around a table, eating something. The only dish on the table was something that looked like a large leather sack. They each grab something from the sack and eat it. The putrid smell stings my nose. My mind falters for a moment.

“Turn around! Do not look at the thing they’re eating. Don’t breathe!”

“This is driving me mad, detective… But it looks so cozy in there? It looks like a bedroll…”

“You’ll be eaten and turned to manure once you get in that ‘bedroll’.”

“.....”

Ezra was completely entranced. I smacked her in the chest, as quietly as I could.

“Gueh.”

I gave Ezra a handkerchief so she could cover her nose.

“Keep it tight. We’re heading to the kitchen now.”

Leaving behind the feast, we crawled toward the kitchen. A long line of people waited in front of it. Those were the people reported to be missing. They enter the kitchen one by one, and then human-shaped flesh hunks walk out, each carrying a leather sack. They bring it to their table and eat from it.

“The food that bewitches people, huh…”

“What could they be eating, detective?”

“It’s time to find out. Get ready, assistant.”

Ezra took a Stigma Workshop sword out of her bag. I pulled out my smoking pipe. The door leading to the kitchen is wide open. People lining up for their sack pay no attention to us. They’re simply mumbling to themselves. We proceed slowly.

“...We’re going in.”

I can hear the sound of kitchenware at work. The chef is busy cooking something, holding multiple cooking utensils with the hands that are on their tails. What could they be cooking? What are they feeding those people with...

“Detective. People are bowing to the chef, to show their heads… The chef is splitting them open, and… taking something out? It doesn’t look like a brain…”

“They aren’t extracting the brain itself. They’re pulling something out of

it... Could it be… thoughts…?”

“How is that possible?”

“That’s what the Distortion is all about. Unseeable things are materialized.”

“That means they’re giving away their thoughts to the chef, so the chef can cook them… And…”

“The chef also peels their skin to use as the sack. That’s pretty wicked.”

My eyes met the chef’s gaze.

“Hey, you’re the insane bunch I saw earlier today! If you wanna eat, then line up! The taste’s gonna be nothing like the stuff you ate before!”

“What are you feeding these people?”

“I’m giving ‘em what they want. I cook thoughts. People these days don’t even know what they’re thinking, so they need someone else to cook those thoughts up and feed ‘em.”

“You’ve already killed people…”

“A case of the Distortion that is capable of murder would be… according to the standards our Office set up, um... A Risk-Level 3 Distortion.”

“Kill? They aren’t dead. They’re having a feast, don’t you see? Ordinary food isn’t enough to make people happy anymore. You gotta

know who you are and what kinda world you're living in to truly savor the flavor."

"This is almost like a cheap urban myth. You've gone too far."

"Wahh, detective! The fleshy things in the restaurant all came in here!!"

"You just haven't tried it yet… I'll show you how your thoughts taste…"

"Ezra, take them down."

The Stigma Workshop sword emits an orange glow. The wire on its blade heats up. Each time Ezra swings the sword, one of the hunks of flesh falls to the floor. The heated wire leaves beautiful symbols through the sections it slices, a trademark feature of Stigma Workshop's products. The smell of burnt meat soon fills the kitchen.

A sentient case of the Distortion that willingly harms others is ultimately subjected to termination. We sometimes encounter Distortions that we can't take down on our own, but most of them can still be dealt with in some manner. This kind is especially simple.

"Have you tried your own cooking, then?"

Self-contradiction. Distortions that damage others while claiming to care for them are bound to face irony.

"……"

"So you're feeding others with a dish you haven't even tried yourself? What makes you so confident in its taste, hm?"

“...My cooking has to be tasty! All the customers looked sad and sulky even when I served them with the most delicious food before. It’s because they didn’t think for themselves!“

“You can tell if the food is tasty just from a person’s face? Someone who doesn’t try their own cooking isn’t a real chef.”

“Nnnnrg… Fine! I’ll eat it! I’ll eat my own food!”

“There we go~ That’s the spirit of a true chef.”

The chef split open their own head.

They put their hand into their brain and pulled out something glowy.

As soon as the chef was done taking all the ‘thoughts’ out, they collapsed onto the floor.

Just like that, the chef passed away before they could taste their own thoughts.

“Detective! I took care of them all!”

“I’m done with my share, too.”

“Should we contact the Zwei Association now?”

“Yeah, just write up a short report. They won’t believe all this fuss about cooking thoughts anyways. I’ll go get some sleep first.”

“Got it~”

“Good morning, detective Moses! You’re a bit later than usual today, huh?”

“Uh, yeah, the line at HamHam-PanPan was long today. Guess everyone wants to check it out since it’s the first to open in the north of the City.

“Oh… HamHam-PanPan… Did you get some for me too?”

“Yeah, got one for you just in case. You liked mustard, right?”

“Heheh, mustard flavor’s great! Ah, the Zwei sent us the reward just now.”

“That quick? It only took them a day, I bet they scamped the paperwork.”

“Anyway, to sum up this case, it was about an unappreciated cook who wanted to bring joy to the people in their own, twisted way!”

“It was a crude story. We’ve had to deal with the Distortion on our own a lot more often these days, now that I think about it.”

“Why are the Wings and the other Associations so passive about it? Monsters are actually appearing!”

“Because none of them were noteworthy enough to even be an Urban Plague, well, ‘The Pianist’ being the sole exception.”

“Still, shouldn’t someone do something about this?! It’s like a ticking time bomb!”

“I bet a lot more people die to Syndicates than to the Distortion.”

“By the way, you’re not actually gonna cut my salary, are you? That stupid chef’s food really was the cause!”

“Psh, try using that good memory for something better.”

“I can hear you!”

- What the next chapter holds…

This room is breathing. I can feel its respiration. Its beat. No one knows how many people this room has devoured. A dying elderly person stands before me. A lonely old person whose breath is fainter than the room’s. Forgotten by others, this aged person has brought and taken in people. As the doddering one faded from everyone’s memories, so too did the people they took in.

Chapter 3: The Photographer

And I simply remember.

A detective Office for unsolved cases, located in a 3-story building somewhere in the streets of District 14.

It’s a mystery how people manage to find their way to my humble Office.

“There’s rumors of a haunted alleyway. People who pass by it disappear.”

“How do they disappear, exactly?”

Ezra asked curiously.

“No one knows who disappeared or how. All we know is that someone disappeared somehow.”

“Then it’s either a Memory Manipulator or a Reality Warper.”

“But detective, I thought Reality Warpers only existed in your theories?”

“This might as well be our opportunity to see one for the first time.”

“What’s this all about?”

“Ahaha, it’s just our jargon. Where did they go missing, by the way?”

Ezra changed the topic before the client could ask further.

“It’s somewhere around the Plaza of Cherished Hopes.”

“That’s ot too far from here.”

“How did you know that people went missing?”

“Used vehicles and objects were found abandoned in the street, like bicycles and cars. And most of all, the furniture in my attic was sorted as if someone had been living there until today."

“That means one of your family members has disappeared.”

“Huh? But there’s only three people in my family, and they’re all fine. Me, my husband, and my child.”

“We’ll see if we investigate it.”

“...What if there really was another family member I’ve forgotten like you said? And if they’re dead…”

“...The culprit should be killed.”

“That’s rather stern.”

“Well then~ We should start discussing the request fee!”

Ezra’s eyes sparkled as she spoke. I left the financial management of our Office to her. She has enough wits to figure out how serious or tough a request will be, so I can trust her to lead negotiations like this. I

headed out to the terrace while Ezra and the client were busy bargaining.

I smoke from my pipe, feeling the acrid breeze of the Backstreets. Still, this air is much clearer compared to the messy atmosphere during the Smoke War. Distorted creatures walk the streets as always. Wondering how long I'll be doing this, I puff tobacco smoke.

"Detective! I'm done writing the contract. The client went back to her home."

"Plaza of Cherished Hopes was it… Get ready."

"Yes, chief~ Do I bring the usual gadgets?"

Ezra asked as she stuffed equipment into her dimensional bag.

"Sure."

I walk along the street with Ezra. The time is 2 PM.

"Tadaa~ Here we are at the Plaza of Cherished Hopes! What do we do now? Wait till the night falls?"

This case appears to be a Location-type Distortion, judging from the client's description. A powerful Distortion can affect its surroundings as well, assimilating nearby objects into it.

"We should look for any distorted buildings."

"But only you can see those weird buildings, detective~ What can I

do?”

“See if there’s abandoned bikes around here, maybe.”

Windows with eyes, apartments floating in the air, doors with teeth, rooms filled with water… There are a lot more distorted buildings than it seems. It would be quite a sight if they manifest all at once.

Now, which building to investigate first? I don’t have any specific criteria set in mind. Some deduction and intuition are all it usually takes to figure it out. This one is a case of the Distortion that devours people whole. The victims are soon forgotten by others. Why were they attracted to that Distortion? I need the profiles of the missing people, but if no one knows who disappeared, it’ll be difficult to figure out their common traits.

“Ezra, look for a place around here that provides goods or services for free.”

“Wha~? For free? Does that kinda place even exist…”

“Preferably a place where people who don’t have a job would go.”

And that is why it’s easier to figure it out. The distortions of this City are actually rather simple to understand.

“Ah! There it is. A place called ‘Lumir Soup Kitchen’.”

“Is it sponsored by anyone?”

“Nope, it seems to be run by an individual.”

“Lead me there.”

People who are destined to be forgotten in the City will naturally be attracted to free meals.

“Isn’t this a photo studio?”

“What? It looks like a worn-out tent, though?”

“...It’s a Distortion.”

“Does that really look like a photo studio to you, detective?”

“Mmhmm. An aged studio. So, this is the soup kitchen, right?”

“Yep. The description says they give away free meals to children or the elderly who are too poor to afford anything else.”

“Do we use the Fairy to enter?”

“Huh?? Don’t you know how expensive it is to recharge the Fairy?! This is just an ordinary tent camp. All we gotta do is walk in.”

“I asked because I’m seeing a door sealed with a lock. I don’t like how you talk back. I’ll be cutting off your salary.”

“Whaaat?!”

“I’m just kidding.”

“Aren’t you having too much fun with that?! It shakes my heart even if it’s a joke… Say, should we wait till night?”

“We can interfere with a Distortion that’s manifested this much already.”

“What are we waiting for, then!”

“Hold on. You shouldn’t just barge into a closed-off section of someone else’s mind.”

I walked up to the door and gently knocked on it. Soon enough, the door was unlocked.

“Let’s get inside.”

“What did you just do? The entrance opened up on its own!”

“I simply showed courtesy. You told me not to use the Fairy or anything, so all I could do was knock on the locked door.”

A photo studio set up inside a wooden building. The whole building exudes the smell of hardwood. And large frames fill up the walls.

“Wow… It’s much bigger on the inside? Now I see why you said it looks like a photo studio, detective.”

“I guess it’s visible to you now.”

“Could those photos on the walls be the missing people?”

“Perhaps.”

Each frame held a picture of corpses. Various photographs of dead people. One common feature is that they all died indoors.

This room is breathing. I can feel its respiration. Its beat. No one knows how many people this room has devoured. A dying elderly person stands before me. A lonely old person whose breath is fainter than the room’s. Forgotten by others, this aged person has brought and taken in people. As the doddering one faded from everyone’s memories, so too did the people they took in. Not a single person knows them. They were here, dying all alone.

“This is a place of memorial.”

A person whose head turned into a camera greeted us from behind. The four lenses on their head rotated disorderly, fixing their gaze onto me.

“Yikes!”

Surprised, Ezra fell on the floor.

“I remember each person in their photograph. I take pictures of them and frame them.”

“Who are you?!”

“I’m a photographer. I believe I should be the one asking who you two are, in fact?”

“This is Moses the Distortion Detective, and I’m the talented sidekick, Ezra!”

She speaks with confidence, revealing our identity so shamelessly...

“We are Fixers. We actually got a request about recent cases of disappearance.”

“So they do realize that some people have gone missing. What’s the point of it all, though? They were already treated like invisible people even before they disappeared…”

“Did you lure them here with free meals to kill them?”

Ezra questions the person while looking at them with suspicion.

“No, I didn’t. I’m simply remembering the people who are bound to be

forgotten, like Mrs. Agnes over there. I take pictures of them so that they can be memorialized in this room."

The old person standing before us must be Agnes. She's staring at the pictures hanging on the wall, letting out heavy breaths.

"There are so many people who die alone. I realized that as I worked, so I want to remember them."

"What work, kidnapping people?"

"No, not at all. My work was accompanied by an awful stench. When its neighbors report the smell, I go and retrieve the body."

"So you were a mortician who usually dealt with people that died lonely deaths."

"Yes. My work was to look for such bodies in the streets of District 14 and direct funerals for them, as part of the welfare plans of N Corp's Nest. I've arranged funerals for 253 people, and not a single mourner showed up at all of them. I decided to take one last photograph of the dead before I retrieved their bodies, so that at least I could remember them."

"So you weren't running this "soup kitchen" from the beginning?"

"I got fired. N Corp's Nest said they don't need a useless undertaker like me."

"...Funerals are for the living, after all."

"I'd meet the same fate, since I don't have anyone to remember me. For a life to be meaningful, the memories have to be passed on

somehow. So we've decided to remember each other, remember that we existed and lived in this City."

"You are distorted. What you've been doing is kidnapping people coming to your tent for free meals, nothing more. You aren't one to decide whether they'll die alone or not."

"But it's obvious! It's so apparent that they'll all die in their own rooms, abandoned and forgotten by all… We'll remember each other, and we'll be forgotten in peace. We have the right to not be neglected by everyone so ruthlessly!"

"And rob the people who still do remember them of their memories? You just kidnapped people who were in the same shoes as you, because you yourself were afraid of being forgotten. You took away their chances to be remembered."

The lenses on their head started rotating all of a sudden.

Uiiiiii...

I dodged to the side as soon as I heard the sound of something starting to run.

Sn-ap!

I fell on my knees and faltered on the floor. My whole body feels numb, and sharp pain strikes my head.

"Detective!"

“Stay away from the lens! Don’t let it take a full picture of you!”

The sounds of the lens rotating and the film being reloaded can be heard.

When it takes a photo of someone, it draws out something from that person.

I feel acute twinge all over my body, as if numerous spikes were stabbing me.

I remember a few that inflicted this kind of pain.

“Ezra! I’m putting up a smokescreen!”

“Yes, chief!”

I took out the smoke pipe from my coat and blew it out as hard as possible.

Pshiiii

The smoke covers the whole room.

Uiiiii… Sn-ap.

Uiiiii… Sn-ap.

Uiiiii… Sn-ap.

The camera flash goes off in random directions with each snap.

“Detective! What are we gonna do now?!”

Huff...

The type that shouldn’t be allowed to see.

I mustn’t let it contain us in its sight.

“What’s in your bag today?!”

“The usual! Stigma Workshop sword, Allas Workshop gloves, Koori gloves, Nester hammer… and…”

“Throw the Koori gloves at me!”

“Got it!”

Only Ezra can see me through this thick smoke.

A pair of sky-blue gloves flew across the room, and I snatched them right away.

I put on the gloves and slammed the wall with my hand.

The wall begins to freeze over.

Sn-ap.

Sn-ap.

I took a deep breath in through my pipe.

Uiiiii...

The smoke that had filled the room is sucked back into the pipe.

A shiny wall of ice reveals itself.

Sn-ap.

The lens flashed, taking a picture of its own reflection on the icy wall.

Crack!

The Photographer fell down, cracks showing up on its head and lenses.

“Huff… You made others be forgotten because you didn’t want to sink into oblivion alone.”

“Perhaps… Maybe I was the only one who had completely lost their chance to be remembered, after all…”

“How many people have you locked in here?”

“57…”

“Can you recover them?”

“Yes... I can…”

“Then your life is spared at least. Bring them back now.”

“But who will be there to remember me now?”

“...We will.”

“...Thank you.”

The Photographer’s head returned to normal, only a single eye retaining the shape of a lens.

The studio regressed to a tent, now full of people.

The Distortion was solved.

“We’ve found the missing family member. He’s the one, right?”

The client doesn’t look too happy.

“Oh… Yeah… My father’s back. Haha, no wonder I forgot.”

“Well then! Shall we transact the remainder?”

Ezra counted the money with a smile, while the client and her father headed back looking depressed.

No one would welcome the outcome of this request.

They'd have much preferred to just forget about the people who eventually made it back.

They'd murmur to themselves about how they wished those people to disappear forever.

I heard later that 58 people's worth of smoke quietly billowed out of crematoriums in the Backstreets of N Corp's Nest one day.

And I simply remember.

Any subscriptions or financial support will be greatly appreciated and allow for more content to be created.

- What the next chapter holds…

"Greetings, Doctor Moses. It's been a while."

An unwelcome guest visited me. An Associate Fixer in Section 2 of the Seven's southern branch, and my former assistant, Hee-joon.

Their eyes are just as arrogant as I remember.

Chapter 4: An Unwelcome Guest

Han Hee-joon

“Greetings, Doctor Moses. It’s been a while.”

An unwelcome guest visited me. An Associate Fixer in Section 2 of the Seven’s southern branch, and my former assistant, Hee-joon.

Their eyes are just as arrogant as I remember.

“Must feel good to be playing in the big leagues way above me, doesn’t it?”

“Oh no, not at all.”

“Hello~ Hee-joon seonbae!”

Ezra, you tactless dork. I hope you realize how much they’re looking down on us by now.

“What are you doing here, heading north all the way up here from the south part of the City? It must be a complete mess down there with L Corp collapsing.”

“You’re sharp as always, doctor. I’m actually here because of that.”

“What? Look, I’m just too old to get myself involved with the Wings.”

“The Distortion… You can still see it, right?”

“…I would’ve closed this Office otherwise.”

“I wonder how I appear to you, then…”
Snobby prick, always asking questions I’m not comfortable with.
“Well… Your mouth is sewn up, it seems? Perhaps because it’s actually going to be zipped up soon enough?”
I actually can’t see their face at all, other than their two eyes floating in the air.

“Haha, you haven’t changed at all. Don’t you need some funds?”

“Do I look like I’m in a financial crisis?”

“Then why else would you be doing work as silly as ‘The Distortion Detective’…?”

“……”

“I see, it’s because you still can’t forget about what you did back then. You still regret that, don’t you?”

“That’s enough! Shut up, Hee-joon seonbae!”

Ezra grabbed Han Hee-joon by the collar. The uncanny smile in their eyes still wouldn’t go away.

“…Let them speak on.”

“Ezra and I were the only ones to survive your rampage that day. You are essentially responsible for our lives, doctor.”

“What do you want me to do, bite my tongue and die?”

“I can’t have you die on us so easily, no. You still owe us so much debt.”

“Get to the point. Why did you come all the way here from the south.”

“I want you to head down there for a while. The southern branch is dealing with troubling incidents that are suspected to be cases of the Distortion. We need your ability, doctor. And please stop with your shabby attempts to ‘solve’ your cases. What we want is the Distortion manifesting in its whole. Don’t try to restore them. Just leave them be until they fully distort.”

“What, is the Seven into human experiments now?”

“I suppose you could put it that way. I’ve reserved two WARP tickets departing from N Corp’s Nest in two months, so take the train and visit our Associate Office once that time comes.”

“Is it a request directly assigned from the Seven Association?”

“Yes, it’s an Urban Nightmare-class. You’re free to deny it, of course. You don’t care too much about belonging to associations, after all. But… You might be able to meet a certain person at the end of this request.”

“…Leave the tickets here and sod off.”

“I look forward to seeing you, doctor.”
Hee-joon left, once again smirking with their eyes.

“Ezra! Throw some salt out the door or something!”

“We don’t have any salt in the Office, though? Should I go buy some?

You know what, I gotta buy some!”

“Sigh… I knew this day would come…”

The Office feels like a devastated warzone after that snob swept by. I keep smoking until the evening, fighting the memories of my past.

“Ezra! Bring me a map of the city.”

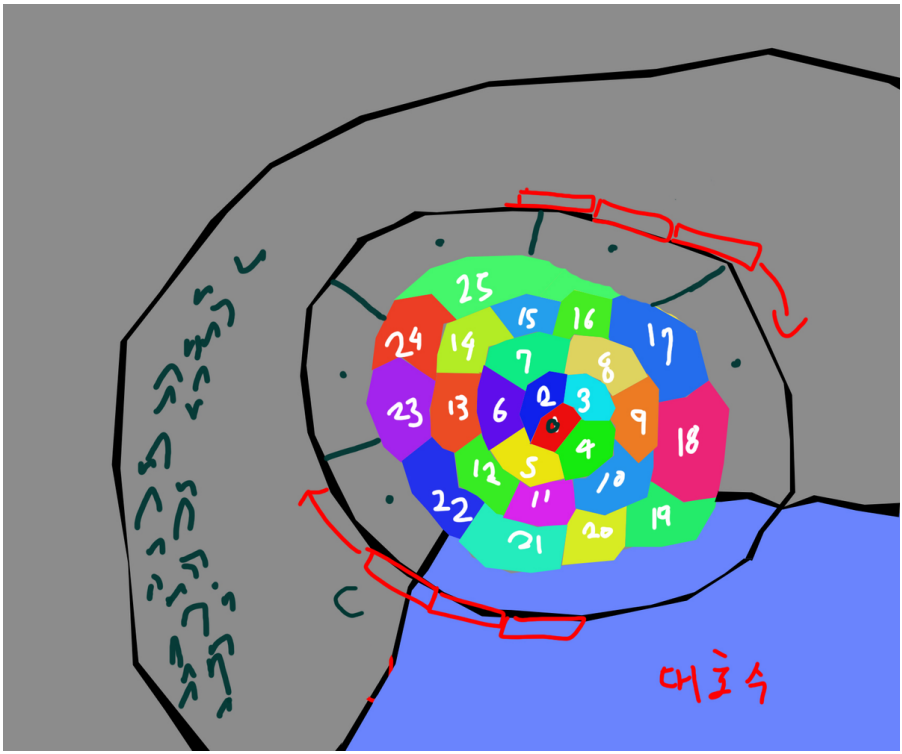
“Yes, chief! Ah, but we don’t have an officially printed map here… One sec, please! I’ll try drawing one up.”

She’s passionate in weird areas. And that’s what makes her fit to be my assistant.

“Here! It’s done. I made it using Picturestore.”

“You call this a map..?”

“Well, it works!”



We live in District 14, which belongs to N Corp's Nest. Taking a WARP train is the only feasible way to get to District 11 in K Corp's Nest. I frankly want nothing to do with the white-tie Fixers in the south, but at the end of the day, I have no choice but to go. All because I committed an irreversible misdeed.

"Two months later, huh…"

"Hee-joon seonbae said this was related to L Corp, then why aren't we just going straight to District 12 where L Corp. used to be?"

"I heard L Corp's Nest has already fallen into absolute anarchy. They probably called us to stay in a safe place that's relatively close to it. The WARP platform in L Corp's Nest likely stopped operating

anyways.”

“Detective, are you really gonna drop solving Distortions once we get there? Are we just going to kill them?”

“That’s not up to me to decide. It’ll depend on the severity of the Distortion.”

“But what if we ran into a Distortion that could be reversed if we tried?”

“…We can think about that later. There’s still time, so let’s do our work as usual for now.”

“Got it! I’ll fetch our next request!”

- What the next chapter holds…

“Uwaaa! Detective! Detective! Is this a Distortion too?!”

“…I can’t believe this.”

It seems it’s time to update my information on the Distortion Phenomenon.

“Keep it together, detective! We gotta run for now!”

Chapter 5: Mock Exam

The exam has begun.

It’s been a week since Han Hee-joon stirred up a storm in my head. There’s no point in being ambivalent about going there, I know that I have no other option. What am I agonizing for, then?

“Detective, this request is about a high school!”

Ezra spoke in a cheery tone as usual.

“A school? Was it requested by its faculty or the principal?”

“Um, no… This student here is our client.”

“Hello… My name is Meryl.”

The girl shyly standing behind Ezra introduced herself. One of her legs is composed of numbers.

“What’s your school? I’m not sure if a student from the Backstreets even has enough money to make a request to our Office.”

“Detective! Actually! She’s a client… I mean, a student from a private high school inside N Corp’s Nest!”

A student from a private school in the Nest… The allowance these kids regularly get from their parents should be more than enough to pay us.

I'm willing to play with those rich kids in their little detective games as long as the request fee is paid.

"So, what problem does our young client want us to solve?"

"Actually… Something strange is happening in our school. An important exam is ahead of us, and everyone's on edge preparing for college admissions."

High school students in the Nest should aim for universities in the Nest as a matter of course. The college scholastic ability test, held in most Nests every year; this one exam determines a myriad of things. Getting low scores and going to a college in the Backstreets won't do you any good. Entering any college in the Nest is pretty much the baseline requirement for joining a Wing.

"So the strange events happening in the school must be disturbing your studies. And you want us to resolve it, right?"

"It's not just about my grades…! My friends got weird… The whole school is weird! The students… And the teachers too…"

"We need you to let us know what kind of strange occurrences are taking place before we can be of any help."

"They won't go back home at all. The classes won't end!"

"All of the students?"

"Yes, all of them…"

"What about you?"

“I… Only I could escape. I was in a classroom when I came to my senses. It was past midnight. A teacher was watching us from the front of the class, and all my friends were absorbed in study, solving problems in workbooks.”

“Aren’t parents worried about their children not coming back home?”

Ezra asked, confused by the apparent strangeness.

“It’s Suneung (CSAT) soon enough… Our school’s average scores for the mock tests made the top 10 in our Nest.”

The parents must’ve been okay with however the school treated their kids as long as their grades were improving.

“How long has this anomaly been going on?”

“The last thing I remember before I lost myself was two months ago… It was the day when the school announced that they’re making a scholarship class. They said students with the highest grades would be selected.”

A Distortion that has lasted for two months…

“We should go there and see what’s going on ourselves. Ezra! We’re heading into the Nest.”

“Yes, chief! I’ll get the Fixer license and the Association certificate~”

I don’t really feel like staying in N Corp’s Nest any longer than necessary. A place full of buildings painted in pure white. I’d end up

going crazy in no time if I lived there.

The squarish five-storey school building is also in white. Through the white gate is a white schoolyard. The school is dead silent. Then something foreign catches my eye. A red number floating on the rooftop of the school. “5”.

“Meryl! What is that number on top of the school building?”

“Ah, that shows how many days are left until this year’s final mock exam.”

“It’s painted in a menacing blood red.”

“But detective! The number’s white just like the rest of the school, though?”

“…It’s a Distortion.”

Red liquid drips from the number sign.

“Are there any procedures for us outsiders to take before entering?”

“There are, but I don’t think anyone cares right now.”

When we enter the school building, a noise can be heard.

Scritch… Scratch…

The noise grows louder and more frequent.

ScritchScratchScribbleScribbleScritchScratchScribbleScribbleScritchScratch

It hurts my head.

“What is this grating noise?”

“It’s the sound of students in each class solving problems on worksheets… They press the pencils against paper so hard when they write....”

I look through the windows of a class designated 1-7. Forty students had their heads fixed inches above their desks, only their hands moving briskly.

“What do those students look like to you, detective?”

“Amalgamations of numbers in school uniforms.”

“Yeesh! That means the Distortion has progressed by a lot, right?”

“They’re pretty much distorted already…”

“Umm… What do you mean by ‘distorted’?”

“That means the strange events you described are happening in real life.”

Something showed up from the end of the corridor. It was a moving wall, big enough to blockade the corridor completely.

“Warning! Warning! Students who do not study will face disciplinary action!”

“Detective! It’s a Distortion! I can see it too!”

A formula is written on the wall. A Distortion made of math problems. This world is never short of oddities, isn’t it? This one seems to be a calculus problem…

“Ezra! Can you solve that problem for us?”

“Ehehe… No…”

Tsk, why did I even bother asking. Accounting is the only kind of calculation she’s good at.

“How about you, Meryl?”

“Well… I’m more of a humanities major...”

“Hoogh…”

Behind us is a dead end. We have to break through anyhow. All we have to do is solve that math problem on the wall, but no one is up for it.

Guess it's up to me now.

I took out my ballpoint pen and wrote down an answer on the approaching wall.

"Wrong answer! You will attend supplementary lessons! Now!"

Knew it. The wall pressed against us. So this is how it ends. I should get someone smarter to be my assistant next time…

My consciousness fades.

When I woke up, I found myself sitting at a desk in a classroom, wearing the school's uniform. Students around me are still busy solving problems on the worksheets. How much time has passed? A red number "30" floats at the center of the class. The last one I saw read "5"... Does that mean we traveled back to the past? Could this be

a case of the Distortion that can reverse the flow of time?

A sudden burst of force pressed my head from behind.

My face was slammed right onto the desk.

“Solve the problems.”

An oppressive voice ordered me.

I skimmed through the worksheet on my desk.

‘17) Blending 3 humans in a mixer generates 10 units of energy. Given these conditions, what is the optimal solution to dismember 2 humans to generate 15 units of energy?’

‘23) Cheolsoo wants to be an artist. The Wing Cheolsoo has to go to does not need any artists. Given these conditions, how many dreams should Cheolsoo kill?‘

’45) There is a cube composed of miniscule humans. The cube factory

must meet a certain quota each day. An eyeball can be squeezed for a hexagon. When O is the outer center of the left eye, how many right eyes are needed to make a cube with side lengths that are 4 meters long?'

A distorted school giving out distorted problems. They must constantly print out meaningless problems that'll be solved without any significance.

"Boohoo… Detective… I have no idea what any of these problems say…"

Ezra's seat was right next to mine. She's looking at me, her face on the verge of tears. I barely lift my head and look at the number again. "17"... So that was in minutes, not days.

"Let's wait until the exam starts. Just write down random things on the worksheet for now."

"Got it…"

A voice could be heard again.

"You have ten minutes until the mock exam starts. You must strive to solve as many problems as possible. This is all for the sake of your future. The problems you solve now will be your weapons later in life."

The number reached zero.

Ding dong dang dong~

“Commencing the mock exam.”

With that announcement, the school crumbled.

All that remained were the students on a white plain.

Then a tall staircase rose from the middle of the field.

A trophy was placed on top of it.

The exam has begun.

“Uwaaa! Detective! Detective! Is this a Distortion too?!”

“…I can’t believe this.”

It seems it's time to update my information on the Distortion Phenomenon.

"Keep it together, detective! We gotta run for now!"

It appears that a massive world of its own can be created when the interests and desires of a large group of people coincide. This is my first time seeing a Distortion occur at this scale.

Mass Distortion… This entire school is distorted. No, it's not the school building itself; every student in it is distorted. All the students run toward the staircase, trying to climb up it. Some try to nail down the students ahead of them, while others push away the students behind them. The numbers add and subtract each other; they multiply and divide by each other. Decimal points pour out of their bodies.

This is a warzone, for a very vicious battle…

A war where everyone recognizes each other as numbers. No other words are needed. In this scene of numerical violence, they must add to themselves and divide others. The problems they've solved so far become weapons to kill each other. When a student assaults another with numbers, the numbers on the victim's head fall off.

The number students won't attack us. Perhaps lowly numbers sitting at the bottom of the staircase like us aren't worth their attention.

"Hey Fixers! I'm up here!"

It's Meryl. Her distortion progressed much more in the short span of time we were separated from her. She was already halfway to the top of the stairs.

"Meryl! You should come back down here!"

Ezra yelled.

"Meryl! There's no reason to climb those stairs. This is a war, a gamble. Fighting against each other with knowledge and grades on the line. If you don't climb the stairs, you'll be safe from it!"

"No…! I'll stay here. We all agreed on this to decide who gets to advance to the scholarship class!"

Meryl replied, killing other students.

"You're taking part in this massacre?"

"I'm already halfway there, though? I can go farther!"

A "7" struck Meryl's head out of nowhere. The numbers in Meryl's head scattered about as she fell to the floor.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

I can hear the sounds of numerous students hitting the floor. The noises of students killing each other. Ezra has turned away from the sight, looking at the floor. I silently continue to watch the staircase.

A student with a giant number for a head reached the top of the stairs at last.

“The exam is over! Knowledge and grades will be redistributed to students based on how high they are on the staircase. The top 20% will be designated as the scholarship class and receive the honor of representing our school!”

With a flash, the school returned to normal. The students were all in their seats as if nothing had happened. I can see Meryl among them.

“Meryl! Are you alright?”

Ezra ran toward Meryl to check on her.

“Oh… Ah…. Uhh…”

Meryl gave us a blank stare, muttering meaningless words.

“She’s had everything taken from her…”

“This is absurd…”

“…It was a consequence of Meryl’s own choice. There’s no need for you to feel guilty about it.”

“But…”

“…Let’s just head back.”

“We couldn’t solve this Distortion…”

“We can’t expect to solve every problem in the world.”

I took out my pipe from its inner coat pocket.

“Why are distorted people all so irrational? They’re all too extreme!”

“…They distort because their minds are driven into a corner. That impatience leads to leaps in their logic.”

40 percent of this school’s graduates are said to be living in seclusion,

having failed to enter any college. However, the scholarship class demonstrated an unprecedented amount of successful admissions to prestigious universities, bringing the school fame and many more inquiries for entrance.

The students who have successfully climbed up the stairs killing each other will grow into the feathers of the Wings. Fluttering those Wings, the City soars.

Any subscriptions or financial support will be greatly appreciated and allow for more content to be created.

- What the next chapter holds…

“We’re shopping at the workshop district today! That means we also get to eat outside, right?”

“Sigh… We’re not going there for leisure.”

“I know! Our purpose of visit is to request the workshops for equipment and gadgets we need in our Office!”

Chapter 6: Smoking Pipe

I let out a crimson red breath.

We have one month until we leave for District 11. I've accepted taking Han Hee-joon's offer to be an effective truth at this point, and I imagine it will be a long trip. We might never come back, even.

"We're shopping at the workshop boulevard today! That means we also get to eat outside, right?"

"Sigh… We're not going there for leisure."

"I know! Our purpose of visit is to request the workshops for the equipment and gadgets we need in our Office!"

Ezra spoke with excitement.

"This could be our very last chance to shop."

"…I know that too. We gotta leave in a month."

"You can stay here if you want to."

"I just can't let you eat all the treats down there by yourself, though~"

The workshops in the boulevard treat various necessaries and supplies as well as equipment for Fixers. Therefore, it's important to pick the right workshops according to your needs. Of course,

workshops try to advertise themselves as well; some become known through word of mouth. Despite how complicated it can be to navigate the products at a workshop, I don't expend any effort toward looking for adequate workshop goods myself. My assistant Ezra here is a maniac for workshop products. She seems to have a peculiar tendency to prefer more expensive workshops, but she does a lot of research on various gears and gadgets, and the ones she purchases end up being quite reliable. She's pretty much stuffed her personal collection of gadgets in the dimensional bag by now.

"Detective! The workshops I frequent are all sold out or out of request slots! I wonder what's up?"

"I don't know. Maybe the Fingers are out wreaking havoc on some place we haven't seen. So, have you failed to get any of the equipment we wanted?"

"Yepper, I have… We're not gonna get the gadgets in time if I request for them any later…"

Ezra mumbled.

I walked the streets, believing that things will work out anyhow.

"Detective…! Behind us…"

"Yes… A bunch of nuisances are after us."

Could they be from a Syndicate… maybe an Office of Fixers… or perhaps a Wing…? Whichever they may belong to, they're all essentially the same. They want to extract information from me. Well,

to have a friendly chat with the fellows following us into the streets like this, we need to go deeper into the alleys. We slowly walk through the complex alleyways, intertwined like a maze. Steel doors are lined up on the walls, guarding residences that don't appear to be well maintained. The time is noon. The noise of pedestrians fades away, while the footsteps of our pursuers become louder. We've arrived at a dead end, an empty lot. This is our favored spot for conversations. An obscure corner in the streets with no witnesses. And even if a witness were to exist, they wouldn't be able to go anywhere from here.

"Now, what could you be wondering about friends? So much as to follow us all the way out here?"

I took out my pipe from its inner coat pocket and held it between my lips. That's a lot of people. I'm seeing around thirty of them? They're all wearing green suits. The distortion doesn't seem too bad. All of them are holding weapons like bats and knives. One in a green fedora walks up to us and starts speaking.

"Are you Moses, the Fixer from Cookie Street?"

"Yes, I am."

I answered with a smile.

"We'd like to purchase that long smoking pipe you're carrying."

This was unexpected. Someone already has intel on my pipe?

"For how much?!"

Ezra asks with sparkling passion in her eyes.

“100 million Ahn.”

“Naaay~ This thing’s worth at least 500 million, there’s no way we’re negotiating for a price that low! Right, detective?”

Ezra said in a rather disappointed tone.

“Not even 500 million Ahn could buy it. This is essentially part of me, you see. I never fathomed the idea of selling it to anyone. Who told you about this pipe, by the way?”

“…That’s unfortunate. We were looking forward to a graceful trade.”

The one in the fedora walked back and blended into the group.

“Ezra, can you handle them all on your own?”

“Yes, chief~!”

Ezra yelled as she put her dimensional bag on the ground.

“Street combat loadout!”

In response to Ezra’s command, the Nester hammer flew into her hand as she got equipped with Allas Workshop gloves. The group of thirty people started charging at us all at once. Ezra blocks off the cramped passage to the empty lot by herself as she takes on the gang one by one. Allas Workshop gloves can accelerate the movement of her hands by five times the velocity. Activating the gloves, she swings her Nester hammer, a small, one-handed hammer suited for combat in confined spaces such as the alleyway we’re in right now. The hammer is capable of delivering impact to a large area of the object its head comes into contact with. When the Nester hammer hits one hoodlum in

green with such accelerated force, it punches a wide hole through his chest. She violently swings her other hand to crush the jaw of another ruffian rushing at her. She breaks the bones and smashes the flesh of one mobster at a time, but not even her superior physique could impede all of them from getting through the passage. Most of all, Ezra is not being serious in the first place.

“Ehehe~ Please take care of the ones I missed, detective!”

“…I’m cutting your salary.”

“Whaaat?!”

I let out a crimson red breath. The smoking pipe emitted a scarlet glow before assuming the shape of a sword. I grabbed its handle and prepared to “talk”. I position myself, and stab the blade into the neck of a thug running at me. With elegance and composure in every step, I puncture a red hole in the body of each gangster coming at me. The strong scent of blood soon filled the alleyway and the lot.

“Detective! That fedora guy is trying to run away!”

Ezra yelled at me, her body covered in blood.

I breathed a violet breeze into my pipe. The pipe began flailing around as it elongated. It soon shifted into a whip with purple thorns growing out of it. I lashed out my pipe to snatch the ankle of the person in fedora. They stumbled and fell flat on their face into a pool of blood. Ezra drags the fallen mobster and drops them in front of me.

“Tell me. Who gave you the information about my pipe? I was trying to

avoid using it too often so I wouldn't draw unnecessary attention."

"I'm afraid I cannot say."

"Ezra! Go have some nice heart-to-heart talk with this fellow."

Leaving the interrogation to Ezra, I smoked alone in the empty lot.

Not so long after, Ezra came back with the person whose face was now mashed pretty badly.

"Detective! This one seems to have a lock on their brain or something! I can't get them to spill the beans no matter what I do."

I lifted the head of the mobster and took a look at the back of their head. The tiny logo of J Corp. is branded on it.

"Indeed, it's locked with a Singularity… The client must've spent quite a bit of money. Still, there's a way as long as it's not the more expensive type."

I exhaled a white puff through the pipe. The smoke coils around the mobster's body.

"Now, take a deep breath in."

They began to tremble as they inhaled the smoke.

"You're not acting out of your own will anymore. You're obeying my will. The lock will obstruct your thoughts no longer."

They slowly began to speak at last.

“YuRia Atelier… Wanted to study the mechanisms of that pipe… Said it’s okay for us to kill as long as we brought the thing…”

“Gasp…”

Ezra’s eyes were wide open, shocked by what she just heard.

“Ezra, do you know anything about YuRia Atelier?”

“Of course! It’s a premium workshop only accessible to people with their membership! It’s probably one of the top ten workshops in District 14, I think?”

The workshop maniac’s eyes sparkled as she gave me the explanation.

“Then why couldn’t we join that membership?”

“The conditions are a bit tricky… I don’t think they’ll accept us…”

They want to study the mechanisms of my smoking pipe, huh…

I’m interested in learning how this thing works as well.

“Do you think that workshop could provide us with the gear we need?”

“Yeah! You bet! They most certainly have the skills.”

“Ezra! Lead me to this YuRia Atelier. Let’s say hello to whoever tried to get us killed, and take this thug with us just in case.”

- What the next chapter holds...

“This place is a real piece of work. No wonder we couldn’t be invited to that membership.”

“Yeah… I wasn’t expecting this much…”

[Report] Moses & Ezra

Moses’ Office - They handle mysteries and unsolved cases.

Seven Association Office Fixer-Report - N182301

Author: Han Hee-joon

Name: Moses (모제스)

Age: 49

Gender: Female

Affiliation: Seven Association

Grade: Grade 5 Fixer

Height: 156 centimeters (~5’1” in feet)

Hobbies: Closing her eyes and indulging in deep thought, cleaning her smoking pipe.

Specialties: Concentration, Quick Wits.

Birthday: November 30th

Likes: Tobacco, spending time calmly immersed in thought.

Dislikes: Whiners, impatient people, noise.

Name: Ezra (에즈라)

Age: 28

Gender: Female

Affiliation: Seven Association

Grade: Grade 3 Fixer

Height: 187 centimeters (~6’2” in feet)

Hobbies: Collecting workshop weapons, snacking on cookies while the detective isn’t looking.

Specialties: Request-fee Negotiations, Hectic Brawling.

Birthday: January 27th

Likes: Expensive and powerful weapons, sweets such as sugary coffee and cake, small animals, houses, HamHam-PanPan’s mustard sandwiches.

Dislikes: Waiting for Moses to finish thinking (it’s understandable), flowers (she’s allergic to them).

Chapter 7: YuRia Atelier

“Behold. Your graceful manoeuvres, and this elegant smoke.”

Ezra leads the way, carrying the fedora mobster on her shoulder. She seems excited to visit the esteemed workshop she’s never gotten to enter before. The mobster with a smashed face tries to negotiate with us.

“Hey! Don’t take me to YuRia, please! She’s gonna use me as her test subject, I’m sure of it!”

“Should we really care for the well-being of a crook who tried to kill us?”

“…Yeah, just kill me now! I’d rather die here than be brought to that sick bastard.”

“All the more reason to take you to her, then.”

I answered, smoking from my pipe.

“Whoa~! I used to just take a peek at this place when I walked by, and now we finally get to see what’s inside!”

“Is this the place? Seems pretty small for a renowned workshop.”

A square building about 3 meters tall stood by itself at the center of the street. The small letters written on the workshop’s door read ‘YuRia Atelier’. Under that was a kind instruction that read “Please knock only if you are part of our membership.”

“I read in a catalogue that ‘YuRia Atelier‘ is run by one person! I think that’s why it’s so small.”

“I assume it only produces goods in small quantities, then?”

“That’s not the case, actually! I heard the workshop values both quality and quantity!”

“That’s rather suspicious, but before that… How do we get in here now…”

I could have Ezra break through a door of this size. But, as with most things in the City, you should never judge something by looks alone. The door could very well be armed with some foolhardy security device that melts whoever touches it without authorization.

“Hey, fedora. How do I get into this workshop?”

“…You gotta have the membership.”

“Well, do you have it?”

“Our Syndicate took on the job so that we could get it…”

“Hmm…”

“How did you meet YuRia, then?”

“Detective! Actually, um... YuRia Atelier chooses its own clients. The workshop sends membership invitations to potential patrons, but we haven’t gotten anything yet.”

“What kind of stupid criteria makes this fedora-wearing moron eligible and not us?”

“Sob… You tell me…”

“Fedora. Go open that door.”

“What? No way, who knows what kind of security system it might have…”

“How about this then: if you do as I say, I won’t hand you over to YuRia.”

“…You promise?”

“Sure.”

Fedora walks over to the door. They broke into a cold sweat hesitating to touch the door, before finally reaching out to the door handle. Nothing happens yet. They turn the handle and slowly pull it.

Creeeeak

The door opens, revealing a staircase leading underground. It seems to go pretty deep down. I knew the workshop couldn't be this small.

"Wow~ Detective! I guess the real workshop is down there!"

"Am I free now...?"

"Take the lead."

"Dammit…"

We walked downstairs. Tremors can be felt coming from below. My instincts tell me that this is no ordinary quiver; something is approaching us, quickly.

"Detective! What's that?!"

Actually, what is that? A boar? A bear? A giant creature is running toward us.

"It's a teddy bear! So cute!"

Ezra gleefully spoke with a twinkle in her eyes.

"…What it's about to do to us doesn't seem very cute."

A giant teddy bear charged at us on all fours. Is that a part of this workshop's security system? Curious. Or perhaps it's...

"Ezra! Stop that thing!"

"Yeees~."

The teddy bear swung its paw at the fedora mobster in front of us, removing the upper half of their body one clean swipe.

“Spicy fists mode!”

Ezra equipped Namir Workshop gauntlets on her both hands.

THOOOM

The impact of Ezra clashing with the teddy bear sent a shockwave through the basement. Ezra’s body is augmented through an expensive and unusual procedure. I must say, that teddy bear is impressive in its own right for enduring her sheer strength.

“Hraaaah!”

With a shout, Ezra pushed the bear away and activated her gauntlets. G Corp’s singularity is applied to Namir Workshop’s gauntlets; the weight of the ‘sphere’ embedded in the center of the gauntlets can be freely controlled. Ezra raised the weight of her gauntlets, and punched the rushing teddy bear in the head.

POOMF

With a loud noise, cotton stuffing burst into the air.

Ezra's fist ripped a large hole in the teddy bear's head. She continued to pummel the bear with both her hands, punching even more holes in the teddy bear's body. Cotton stuffing exits the bear and fills the air with each hit, until the bear was torn beyond recognition.

"Huhu… I did a good job, right?"

Ezra spoke triumphantly.

"You did indeed."

The fact that the teddy bear had nothing but cotton inside of it still bothered me.

Going further down, we arrived at a large corridor, and what awaited there caught us by surprise.

"This place is a real piece of work. No wonder we couldn't be invited to that membership."

"Yeah… I wasn't expecting this much…"

This whole workshop is a Distortion. Teddy bears of various sizes are moving diligently. This place is like an automated factory. Whoever is running this factory should be avoiding us if they know anything about the work we do. They're using the Distortion to operate their workshop, so they obviously wouldn't want it to be solved.

"They're still cute, though!"

"Hmph. For you, maybe. At least you have the strength to fend off

those teddy bears if they tried to kill you.”

Walking past the industriously working teddy bears, we reach the end of the corridor. A big workbench is placed there. Other than its enormous size and the use of too many vibrant colors, it appears to be a regular workbench. And someone is standing before it, as if she were waiting for us the whole time.

“Ohmygosh! YuRia!”

Ezra hopped up and down in excitement. She then took something out of her bag and approached YuRia with a loping stride. What is she trying to do?

“Autograph this book here, please!”

Ezra pleaded, bowing her head.

“I’ve been collecting autographs of Workshop Meisters in this book, you see!”

YuRia approached me, paying absolutely no attention to Ezra.

“You must be Moses. I was eagerly waiting for you. And your pipe, too.”

YuRia spoke in a youthful voice. A clear and bright voice. The gleam in her eyes was different from Ezra’s.

“There’s plenty of workshop equipment that can change form. But that pipe of yours is fundamentally different. I'm sure you’re aware of it. It

even modifies one's physical makeup without any surgeries or procedures. When did you get that pipe? How did you learn to use it? I've been looking for such an object for so long."

"I… I know, right?! Detective's smoking pipe is so mysterious, right?"

Ezra chimed in, quickly shoving her booklet back into the bag with her face turning red.

"How distracting…"

I never quite expected the talented Meister to be such an arrogant chatterbox. She is not the kind of person I want to be entangled with.

"You know The Red Mist? The legendary Fixer."

"Yeah. I met her a couple of times."

"The Red Mist's fabled tales of heroics weren't born out of nothing. The weapon she used to brandish and the clothing she used to wear were actually the same sort of equipment as the smoking pipe you're using."

YuRia paused for a moment.

"I'm sure you can feel it, too, maybe vaguely. That smoking pipe… resonates with your emotions."

She's right. This pipe is nowhere as simple as the likes of a mechanical arm that moves according to command. It resonates with my feelings; it's as if the pipe is part of me.

"I've been running this workshop not just to earn cash, but to gather information from the area around me. All the places I've been to before

were busts. But look at this.”

Pzzzt-

A video starts playing from the screen behind YuRia. It’s footage of us fighting Syndicate gangs in the empty lot earlier today.

“Gasp…!”

Astonished, Ezra covered her mouth with her hands.

“Recorded footage… You had the audacity to break the taboo of District 14? Are young people these days all bold and brash like you?”

YuRia went on without a care for our reactions.

“Behold. Your graceful manoeuvres, and this elegant smoke. I’m about to fall in love. My expectations were right; Moses, you’re the one I’ve been looking for.”

“Scratch that, and just tell me. Do you know how my pipe works or not?”

“No, I don’t. Not yet, anyways. Though I can try to study it now. Perhaps I could even improve it into something greater. If we work together, of course.”

She is a nuisance for sure, but I need to learn more. I must know more about this power given to me...

“So, how are you going to try studying it?”

“By looking into your mind. I’ll need to know you. It takes time to get to know each other. How’s this sound, Moses? Are you prepared to show me your heart?”

“Detective! Do you really trust her? I mean, she sounds so suspicious?!”

Ezra yelled in panic.

“Moses, you’re going to trust me no matter what. I know you can see it.”

“Right… What can I do for you, then?”

I answered softly.

“Detective!!!”

Ezra was desperate to make me reconsider. YuRia slowly walked towards me and whispered into my ears.

“I’ll be your assistant. I want to watch you from up close. I’ll make gear and equipment just for you. I want to be of help to you. All so you can open up your heart to me.”

YuRia smiled.

I put my hand on my forehead for a moment. This reminds me of some unpleasant memories of the past. I remember meeting someone just like her. I had no other option then, and I have no other option now. The lifeline that descends upon me when there's no way out; the rope I must hold on to. These are the only kind of opportunities that ever come to me.

"Ezra! We're going back to the Office."

"Yes, chief!"

"With YuRia. Empty a storage room for her."

"Whaaat?!"

YuRia followed right behind me, while it took Ezra a moment to get moving.

The storage room in our Office was remodeled into YuRia's personal space. She promised to make equipment for us, under one condition: that we take her with us whenever we set off to solve cases.

"Detective, it's so weird! Why aren't you solving her distortion? She broke the taboo of the district, too."

Ezra complained as she stuffed HamHam-PanPan's mayonnaise-flavored sandwich in her mouth.

“I’m simply making use of YuRia’s strengths. And I have you to count on, so don’t worry.”

I soothed Ezra. I imagine she’s going to be sulky for a while.

I, Moses, have no trust in other human beings.

I do not trust the words of YuRia, a stranger.

I simply trust my eyes.

She is not distorted.

I do not see any distortion from YuRia.

- What the next chapter holds…

“Not waking from their dreams, huh…”

“What kind of dreams could they be having to make faces like this?”

Ezra said, tilting her head to the side.

“They seem to have escaped into their dreams. We should have a look at their recent work records.”

YuRia spoke with a smile.

“Yeah. I thought so too.”

I said in agreement.

“Eeeee…!”

Ezra groaned.

Oh dear, and I was trying to appease Ezra for a while now...

Chapter 8: Tae-young Produce Company

If this problem isn’t fixed in time, I’m gonna get fired, and all of my subordinates will get sacked

Three people sat around the dining table for two.

“Hnnnnngh…”

It’s early in the morning, and Ezra is already glaring at YuRia. She must be irked by this little intruder that popped into our ordinary life.

“It’s curious how you can stare at me for thirty minutes straight all the while having breakfast. Wouldn’t you agree, detective?”

YuRia spoke with a smile.

“Y-you…! You small little thing...!”

“Detective Moses. It looks like Ezra is mocking us for our height?”

“T— That’s not…!”

Noises. My head is ringing. The rice is well-cooked, and yet I’m losing my appetite thanks to the noisy ruckus those two are causing. This has

been going on for a week. I'd hate to have to deal with this every morning for the rest of my life.

"Quiet!"

"Owie!"

"Gueh."

They yelped as I kicked them in the shin.

"Could two you keep it down while we're eating at the very least?"

Ezra and YuRia nodded.

My appetite is finally restored in the fresh serenity. I place a quail egg boiled in soy sauce on warm rice and eat it. The food we bought from Ran's Sidedish Stall, a grocery store that recently opened up near our Office, turned out to taste good. I should visit them more often. After finishing the meal, I headed out to the terrace to smoke as per my daily routine.

"Ezra, do the dishes."

"Yes, chief~"

Listening to the sound of Ezra washing the dishes, I puff out tobacco smoke and look below. Distorted creatures are heading to distorted workplaces as usual. This scenery of the street will forever be the same.

“YuRia, is the gear all finished?”

“Sure thing. Eleven pieces in total, right, detective Moses?”

Eleven pieces of equipment in just one week, that’s quite impressive. Besides, the gear was commissioned by Ezra, not me. Likely, she must’ve asked for complex and elaborate gadgets to spite her. Their quality is yet to be demonstrated, but the production speed is certainly on the level of a meister.

“…Ezra, is that the correct amount?”

Ezra stops cleaning the dishes for a moment and nods while staring at the plate she’s holding.

It seems like the two won’t even properly talk to each other anytime soon.

“If you keep refusing to cooperate with each other, I’m cutting your salaries, you two.”

“…Eck.”

“I don’t mind that, though? I’m not working here for money after all.”

YuRia responds nonchalantly.

“…I— I don’t mind that, either! Detective! You don’t have to pay me at all this month!”

I can’t believe Ezra would go so far as to say that. These two make such a childish pair. I placed my hand on my forehead.

“Huff… I won't care what the hell you do with each other, so just don’t let your little feud disturb our work.”

“Yes.”

“Got it…”

We haven’t had any noteworthy requests since we took in YuRia. They were all trivial matters where I didn’t have to use my pipe, and most of them weren’t even cases of the Distortion at all. I expected YuRia to be disappointed by this uneventfulness, but she seems hardly bothered. I went downstairs with my pipe still in my mouth and rummaged through the request box. An envelope happens to be waiting for me. I tore it open and read the paper inside.

…This case smells like a big one.

The three of us walk the street together.

“Do you get requests from companies, too?”

YuRia asks.

“Companies in the Backstreets are our most frequent clients, in fact. They love to simply pass the burden of dealing with troublesome incidents onto the Offices that specialize in solving them.”

I answered, holding my pipe between my teeth. Ezra is following us a few steps behind in silence. I suppose I should try to humour her today.

We arrived at the company building. It's a rather large enterprise that occupies the entirety of a 10-storey building. Perhaps it's a subcontractor of a Wing... Ezra and I presented our Fixer IDs as well as the letter of request to the lobby while YuRia showed her workshop union certificate. We received a visitor's pass each and wore them around our necks. The security guard waiting at the elevator confirmed the passes and asked for our destination. "Floor 8." Giving a brief answer, we took the elevator up to the floor written in the letter of request.

When the elevator doors opened on the eighth floor, someone greeted us.

"Ah, hello, dear Fixers! I've been waiting for you. Here's my business card."

The card introduced them as Kang Jin-sil, section manager of Tae-young Produce Co.

"I've requested three Offices about this matter so far, but none of them could resolve it. If this problem isn't fixed in time, I'm gonna get fired, and all of my subordinates will get sacked, too!"

"You don't have to worry anymore. Detective Moses over here will elegantly take care of the case for you."

YuRia intervened, while Ezra still remained quiet.

“Greetings. I’m Moses from Moses’ Office, handling mysteries and unsolved cases. May I ask who recommended our Office to you?”

“The, uhh… Ame! Ame Office recommended you to us. They said Moses’ Office should be the perfect fit for this kind of case!”

Ame Office, that must be where Kaoru is. The kid likes to complain, but they subtly care for us quite a bit.

“Let’s get right to the point. Where are the people suffering from the symptoms you described in the letter of request?”

“Ah, those employees are actually in the sleeping chamber on the fourth basement floor, not up here.”

“A sleeping chamber? What is a sleeping chamber doing in a company?”

YuRia asked curiously.

“That means this is a corrupt company that forces its employees to work overtime so often, they don’t get any time to go back home for sleep.”

Ezra replied in a plain tone.

“Oh my...”

“Hahaha… Well, it’s not just us, you see. Most firms do the same these days.”

Manager Kang appeared rather perplexed by what Ezra said.

“Please lead the way, then.”

“Of course. This way, please.”

We got back in the elevator. Manager Kang tagged their security keycard on the elevator’s control panel, revealing a set of buttons that lead to basement floors. This company building goes as deep as fifteen floors underground. One could very well run into some hidden Ruins at this depth.

“What kind of produce company goes so deep underground?”

Ezra asked.

“Haha, I'm afraid I can’t answer that much in detail. You can just think of the underground space as our warehouse.”

Manager Kang answered as they pressed the button to the fourth basement floor.

With a jingle, the elevator arrived at its destination. We were met with complete darkness when we stepped out.

“Oh my, why is it so dark in here?”

“Because it’s where people sleep, duh!”

Ezra answered YuRia's question again. Manager Kang groped along the wall looking for a light switch, and soon enough, orange lightbulbs on the ceiling lit up, one row at a time.

Flick-

Flick-

Flick-

More people could be seen with each set of lightbulbs lit.

Numerous people were lying on the floor, arranged in an orderly manner.

"Haha, as you can see here… These employees won't wake up at all."

"Not waking from their dreams, huh…"

"What kind of dreams could they be having to make faces like this?"

Ezra said, tilting her head to the side.

"They seem to have escaped into their dreams. We should have a look at their recent work records."

YuRia spoke with a smile.

"Yeah. I thought so too."

I said in agreement.

“Eeeee…!”

Ezra groaned.

Oh dear, and I was trying to appease Ezra for a while now...

“That’s not all, actually…”

AlstBerrewMaxalkWeDronRaxaRyloVassaDengCresodAwaitTufoCluskViowH

All the people lying on the floor opened their eyes and began chanting unintelligible words in unison. The wide underground floor was soon filled with the voices of the many.

“Eeeek!”

Ezra freaked out.

“I think there was some sort of message hidden in what they just uttered.”

YuRia spoke with her eyes closed, focusing on the sound.

AlstBerrewMaxalkWeDronRaxaRyloVassaDengCresodAwaitTufoCluskViowH

The voices once again echoed throughout the floor.

“Manager, we’d like to check their work records for the past month...”

I turned around as I spoke to Manager Kang, who I expected to be right behind us.

Drrrr-

Kang Jin-sil was instead inside the elevator.

Kachink-!

A steel gate then blocked entry to the elevator.

“My apologies, Fixers. Haha, I’m sure you people are capable enough to handle this, right?”

The elevator doors began sliding.

“Tell me… What happened to Kaoru from Ame Office...?”

“You’ll be able to find out soon enough… I hope you can survive this hell…”

The elevator doors were closed completely.

“They got us good…”

The light bulbs on the ceiling flicker.

Every time the light bulbs flickered, hundreds of eyes still lying on the floor could be seen gazing at us.

Dzdzzt - Blink…

Dzdzzt - Blink…

Dzdzzt - Blink…

Dzdzzt - Blink…

…Blink.

- What the next chapter holds…

“Ezra… What we’re about to face is something completely different from anything we’ve dealt with before.”

“Yes, detective!”

Ezra puts her dimensional bag on the floor.

“YuRia, observe me to your heart’s content.”

“Of course I will~”

I held my smoking pipe between my lips.

I closed my eyes, and began breathing in...

Chapter 9: Crimson Point

Every atrocious moment of the past throughout my life swirls around me.

“Uuuu… Detective… I’m so hopeless with this kinda stuff…”

Ezra took cover behind me, speaking in a faint, squeaky voice.

“She’s not helping I suppose. Shall we start out by looking for an exit, detective?”

“Eeeeeeee!”

She still has the nerve to take jabs at Ezra in times like this. I must wonder if she ever gets tired of it.

“Do you have night vision goggles or something of the sort?”

“Ah, right! There’s a few in my dimensional bag!”

“I’m the one who crafted the glasses, though.”

“Well, I planned out the functions for them!”

“I’ll commend you both, so hand me the damned glasses already.”

Ezra rummaged through her dimensional bag and took out three pairs of eyeglasses, handing a pair to each of us. The temples of the glasses are decorated with ribbons. Typical northern workshop fashion… Do they really have to adorn everything they make with such ornaments? Putting on the eyeglasses, I could gain a clear vision of the chamber as if it were brightly lit by the sun. Even with the lightbulbs on the ceiling blinking frantically, the glasses automatically compensate for the rapid changes in brightness, allowing me to see things in a constant degree of brightness. Quite impressive. I would've had to rely on a lighter to barely see things right in front of us in the old days of just Ezra and I working together. It certainly is convenient to have a meister working for our Office.

"Detective, what do we do if they all start jumping at us?"

Ezra worriedly asks.

"I'm pondering on what to do as well."

Looking around, I can count 108 employees here in total. They're all blinking at the same time, chanting the same words. What could this mean? For what purpose? Perhaps…

"…It seems as if the minds of these people are linked together."

"Detective! Over there…!"

Ezra pointed toward a mashed pile of flesh lying in a corner of the sleeping chamber. There were several of them around the chamber, in fact. I can see at least eight of them, all created at different times. We approached a pile that appears to be the most recent.

It's a dead body, as I suspected… A corpse that was crushed brutally.

Something in this room smashed people.

“They were thrown with tremendous force. It’s been at least thirty three hours since this blood was spilt, judging from its state. This body seems to have suffered heavy external damage.”

YuRia said as she observed the pile of flesh with a magnifying glass.

“…Kaoru.”

This sword belonged to Kaoru. That means our opponent has enough physical strength to pound a Grade 4 Fixer to a pulp. The rest of the lumps of flesh nearby are likely what became of the other Fixers from Ame Office. There is nothing in our sight that appears to be the culprit, however. The only other things in this space are one hundred and eight sleeping employees of a produce company still wearing their suits, and the three of us

“Detective! How do those employees appear to your eyes?”

Ezra asks.

“Well, obviously… They have all different forms of Distortions…”

No, something is different. The employees did have Distortions of their own, but without any common trait to be found, much like those I see in the streets. Yet, their Distortions are beginning to disappear. The one whose face was missing regains their face. The one whose right arm was scorched has their arm restored. Cylindrical objects are being removed from another person. The Distortions are all gathering to a certain spot.

I looked toward the point where all Distortions were converging.

Smoke billowed from what appeared to be an altar.

Then their chant must be some kind of code and a ritual to summon something. The smoke gradually condenses into a certain shape. Should we kill all the employees sleeping here? We don’t even know what may manifest from that smoke. It’s hard to judge something we know nothing about. I don't get a good feeling about this. It could turn out to be a favorable phenomenon. It could be an opportunity. At the same time, it’s just as likely to be something that could kill us all. I cannot make any judgement on this phenomenon that I’m experiencing for the first time. Should I kill one hundred and eight people at my own discretion based on an uncertain possibility? The lives of Ezra and YuRia depend on my decision. My thoughts accelerate. Ezra and YuRia are saying something to me. Dammit, I know. I should come up with something. If I were to use my white breath, could I control more than one hundred people at once? I’ve never tried something of that scale yet. However, I’ll only end up ruining myself even in the worst case scenario. Yes, this is the most plausible option I have. Having made up my mind, I opened my eyes.

The floor under each employee opened up, storing them in the space below. It was as if they were being used as batteries of the mind.

…It’s too late.

Only three of us remained in the 100-pyeong[1] space.

Until we noticed something standing before us.

At least 3 meters in body size. Six arms. Massive muscles that look like they could burst any moment. A skeleton head. Blue flames spurting from its gaping mouth. Red eyes staring at me. The shape was complete. The creature assumes a bizarre pose.

This is a completely hostile entity.

Instinctual fear overwhelms us. YuRia grabbed my sleeves tight. Ezra’s eyes changed.

“Ezra… What we’re about to face is something completely different from anything we’ve dealt with

before.”

“Yes, detective!”

Ezra puts her dimensional bag on the floor.

“YuRia, observe me to your heart’s content.”

“Of course I will~”

I held my pipe between my lips.

I closed my eyes, and began breathing in…

This Distortion has the same scent as ‘The Pianist’.

A Distortion dedicated to slaughtering people…

One moment of carelessness means death.

Yet I am beginning to feel excited.

…I suppose this old habit will die hard.

“All-out assault mode, Mark 3!”

Ezra’s dimensional bag emitted an orange glow as she shouted. Ezra armed herself with exoskeletons of various shapes all over her body. Ezra’s big, bulky body was made even bigger, her size now comparable to that beast we’re facing. I noticed that the exoskeletons she’s wearing don’t exactly appear to be the ones I saw her use before. These must be YuRia’s work, though it seems that Ezra found the time to stipple them with stickers like she does with everything else she owns.

“When did you plaster my gear with silly stickers like that!”

YuRia complained as expected.

“…If it looks like we’re about to die, don’t look back and just run. I’m sure you can fix that elevator somehow. I’ll earn you enough time.”

Ezra spoke in a calm tone.

“Wha… What’re you talking about!”

YuRia dropped her usual impudence.

Sigh… I placed my hand on my forehead.

“Stop jinxing us, you two. We’re all making it back alive.”

THOOM-!

With a thunderous kick against the floor, the giant leaped at me. Its skeletal head came right in front of me in the blink of an eye, one of its arms winding up for a punch. A clean hit from that fist could turn me into pulp. I stood still and closed my eyes.

BANG!

Ezra cut in immediately and sent the skeleton-giant flying as quickly as it had approached me.

“I won’t let you so much as lay a finger on the detective!”

SWOOSH

Crashing into the wall, the giant soon jumped out and threw its fist at Ezra.

BAH-BANG-

Ezra held her arms high and deployed a powered shield to block its attack. My hair and coat fluttered from the blast of air created from its impact.

That skeletal giant is a purely physical being. I doubt psychological attacks will have any effect on it. I could try restricting its movement to assist Ezra. But even if I did, can she deliver the finishing blow to that monster? I doubt that, either.

“Ezra! Protect me with all your strength.”

“Yes, chief!”

Ezra responded loud and clear.

I inhaled a crimson red breath.

“YuRia-style rotary drill!”

Three drills emerged from the exoskeleton on Ezra’s right arm as she thrust at the skeleton beast’s body. They struggle to penetrate the giant’s hard skin, throwing up sparks in all directions. The giant uses two of its arms to grab Ezra’s right arm and pushes her away, while charging up strength with the other four. Ezra continues to strike the giant’s waist with her left arm.

BOOOOM

Four straight punches land on Ezra at once; the sheer strength of the giant’s four arms knocks Ezra across the chamber and into the wall.

I inhaled a crimson red breath.

“You dummy! Use the axe!”

YuRia yelled urgently.

“YuRia-style axe!”

Ezra pulled a long pole from her back, which turned into a two-handed

battle axe of enormous size.

“I never thought this stupidly large axe would actually see use…”

YuRia mumbled.

I inhaled a crimson red breath.

Ezra charged at the giant with the axe in her hands.

At the same time, the colossus lifts its right arms and lunges at her.

SLI-I-I-ICE

Three muscular arms of the giant flung into the air, cleaved clean by the axe.

“It’s an axe sharpened by my teddies in my workshop for four whole days. I bet it cuts better than hyper-oscillation blades, huh~?”

“It really does!”

Ezra’s eyes sparkled with enthusiasm.

I inhaled a crimson red breath.

“Watch out!”

YuRia gave Ezra a warning.

ZOOM—

SHUNK

The cleaved right arms morphed into sharp stakes and wedged into Ezra’s flesh. Ezra swings her axe up, chopping off the arm-stakes still stuck in her body. Ezra then proceeded to kick the giant right away, and swung her axe at the giant’s body this time.

KLANG!

“Ezra! The edge is all worn down now…!”

“Tch…”

Ezra threw the frayed axe onto the ground.

I inhaled a crimson red breath.

Ezra and the giant engage in a brutal scuffle. The titan ruthlessly pummels Ezra with its three remaining arms and its legs, crushing her exoskeletons bit by bit. Blood gushes out from the stakes stuck in her body.

“Detective Moses, please!”

YuRia cried at me.

I inhaled a crimson red breath.

I do not stop inhaling.

I close my eyes and sink into my inner world.

Every atrocious moment of the past throughout my life swirls around me.

The memories of violence I never want to recall. Blood. Scars. Corpses. Pain. War. Carnage.

I concentrate all of that malice into a single point.

“Good work, Ezra.”

The smoking pipe became a scarlet, coarse cylinder in my hand.

I aimed the cylindrical shape at the oversized skeleton.

“Crimson Point.”

I stabbed the cylinder into the giant.

The cylinder expanded by about five metres, erasing the creature's upper body.

It bore a hole through the giant's body, a hole created from physical force. Yet the origin of that force was neither external nor internal.

What was once there simply vanished.

My body was shaking. My eyes were bloodshot, and my mind was swarmed with destructive impulses. I must maintain reason.

"Hack".

I coughed out a thick clot of blood.

Then I felt a familiar embrace.

"It's alright, detective… It's over now..."

Ezra hugged me, her body soaked in blood.

YuRia was next to me, sitting on the floor crying.

And I could come back to myself.

“You all did well."

I stood back up and adjusted my coat.

"It’s about time we figured out just what’s going on in this damned company.”

I put my pipe in my mouth.

- Translation Notes

[1] Pyeong: A Korean unit of floorspace; it’s similar to the real estate measurement units of tatami and tsubo in Japan. 100 pyeong is about 330 square-meters or 3558 square-feet

- That which the next chapter holds~

“A white-haired person in a hanbok…”

“Detective… Could that be?”

Ezra gave me an unnerved look.

“Tsk, it means that scoundrel dropped by this company.”

“What are you two talking about?”

YuRia asked us.

Name: YuRia

Age: 21

Gender: Female

Affiliation: ???

Grade: Meister (Self-proclaimed)

Height: 172 centimeters (~5’7” in feet)

Hobbies: Having tea parties with her teddy bears (is what she claims, though they essentially appear to be brainstorming sessions for weapon ideas).

Specialties: Crafting quality equipment at high speed

Birthday: July 15th

Likes: Teddy bears, bitter brewed coffee, collecting unique adhesive plasters (band-aids).

Dislikes: Things that get in her way, cherry cupcakes, coffee with syrup or sugar

Name: Han Hee-joon

Age: 37

Gender: Male

Affiliation: Seven Association - HQ Section 2

Grade: Grade 2 Fixer

Height: 167 centimeters (~5’7” in feet)

Hobbies: I wouldn’t really say he has any; the only thing he did whenever I saw him was the work that’s put in front of him.

Specialties: Quick analytic prowess, level-headed judgment

Birthday: July 20th

Likes: Tidiness, sweet coffee with about 3 sugar cubes

Dislikes: Affairs that leave a mess which needs to be dealt with afterward

Chapter 10: Blockade

…An artificial Distortion created by someone’s design.

“YuRia, you’re more than capable of repairing this elevator, right?”

“…Yes.”

“Please get it fixed as quickly as possible. I’ll be looking after Ezra for a bit.”

“Hehe, no worries, detective. I’ve been through this much a lot.”

There have been few occasions that could harm Ezra this badly, though injuries in general are not a huge concern for her. Still, it wouldn’t hurt to take extra caution, considering that it’s the Distortion we’re dealing with this time. I came near Ezra, who’s resting on the floor, and took out a first aid kit from her dimensional bag.

“It’s been a while since I bandaged your wounds myself.”

“Ehehe, it really has.”

The stakes embedded in Ezra’s body fizzled into vapor when the skeleton beast fell. I wrap a Fanar Workshop pressure bandage on the open wounds. Blood is still oozing out, but there doesn’t seem to be any sign of infection or transmission.

“What was up with this Distortion, detective? These things keep getting tougher and tougher. Could it be the same type as the mock exam case?”

“Beats me… Alright, take care of the rest yourself.”

I stood up and approached the altar-like black box at the other end of the chamber. The Distortions of this company’s employees were sucked into this box, which in turn created a white smoke that manifested into one giant Distortion. That wasn’t a mass Distortion shared by many people like the one we saw in the mock exam case.

…An artificial Distortion created by someone’s design.

“Ezra! Come and get this weird thing when you’re done bandaging.”

“Got it, chief~!”

Ezra picked up the bag and dusted herself off as she stood up.

“Detective Moses, the elevator is working. We can get to any floor we want now.”

This company intentionally put its employees to sleep in this underground chamber, and hired Fixers to fight against the manmade Distortion. What are they planning to do with it? Develop it into a weapon? If they could manage to control the Distortion through technical methods, they’d shake up the balance of power for sure. But how, exactly? How is it possible to quantitatively measure and

manipulate the human mind through a device or two? The technology that could achieve such a feat would be nothing short of a Singularity. It's not an advancement that some obscure company in the Backstreets could make on its own. Something is up with this company.

"…Let's head to the eighth floor."

"Understood. We're heading up."

Ezra hurriedly hopped into the elevator. That strange box fortunately seems to fit into her dimensional bag somehow.

"…Seonbae[1]. Are you feeling alright?"

Silence ensued.

"…Ezra-seonbae!"

"Mmh...? Me? I'm your seonbae?!"

Ezra exclaimed with surprise.

"Since we're both assistants of Detective Moses, and you're my senior here, I'm calling you seonbae from here on out."

YuRia finally seems to have acknowledged Ezra.

"Oh gosh, detective! She must be distorted!"

"Let's save the friendly jokes for when we get back to our Office. We're almost at the eighth floor now."

Ding-dong

We were met with a strong scent of blood when the elevator doors opened. This is the smell of fresh blood. The office was overgrown with green vines, bearing countless red fruits on the ceiling. My eyes traced along the stems of the vines, starting from their tips on the ceiling. They led back to the agape mouths of this company's employees. None of them were alive.

"This is…"

The same box we'd seen in the sleeping chamber was placed in the middle of this office. Yet another Distortion.

"Detective! Does that mean there's more like the one we just fought…"

Concerned, Ezra asked. I placed my hand on my forehead. We can't take this anymore. Both Ezra and I are at our limits. We'll be dead meat if we face another Distortion at the level of the one we encountered just before.

"Ezra! YuRia! Our objective from now on is to survive. Follow every order I have to give you."

The two nod in response.

Wiiiiiiiiwooooooo

A siren went off, followed by an announcement.

‘Emergency lockdown. Emergency lockdown. Tae-young Produce Company is closing business as of now. Repeat: Tae-young Produce Company is closing business as of now. Dear employees, as per the terms of the employment contract, you may not leave the company building. Repeat...’

Shacka, shacka, shacka

Shutters came down on the office’s windows, one by one.

“Ezra! Use as much force as possible to break that window right now!”

“Yes, chief!”

Ezra equipped both Namir Workshop’s and Allas Workshop’s gauntlets on her hands and dashed into the window for a powerful strike. The massive weight of the punch sent tremors through the office, but it only left a dent on the shutter. That was no ordinary steel. We’re completely trapped here. I took out my pipe and started smoking from it.

“Detective Moses. The elevator is no longer functioning. The building’s main system has entirely shut down.”

YuRia gave me bad news on top of this.

Kachink-kachink. SMASH! Kachink-kachink. SMASH!

I hear something shattering. Did the window give in to the impact?

...Of course not. I was a dunce and a fool to make such a hasty assumption.

“Ezra! Get your Stigma blade ready! And YuRia! Can you make a device that can start a fire currently?”

“None that I can craft at the moment. But, I could try using something I prepared for your smoking pipe, Detective Moses…”

Kiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii~!

The red objects hanging from the ceiling were not fruit of any kind; they were eggs. We were in a hatchery of some sort. The shock of Ezra’s punch caused those eggs to hatch. Massive mosquitos with the faces of humans slowly crawled out from the cracked shells.

“Detective! They’re coming!”

Ezra yelled urgently.

“YuRia, let’s try what you suggested, whatever it is.”

I handed my pipe over to YuRia. Ezra held the blade and prepared herself for combat. The mosquitos hovered in the air for a moment before charging at us. Ezra’s fiery sword sliced through several mosquitos, but it wasn’t nearly enough to stop them all. The insects bit Ezra and started sucking the blood out of her body.

“Make it quick, YuRia.”

“It’s done! Try imagining fire, in the same way as when you turned your pipe into the red sword!”

She gave me back my pipe, now with a red ribbon tied around it. I let in a red breath. Bursts of flame rose from the pipe’s bowl, which then took the form of birds. The burning birds fly into the giant pests feasting on Ezra and set them ablaze.

“Thanks, detective...”

Ezra’s voice lacks energy. My body rapidly grows cold. It’s as if my life’s warmth is being drained away. I suppose everything must come at a price.

“Let’s take the stairs over here. This door isn’t locked, thankfully.”

YuRia gave us good news this time, flinging open the door to the stairwell. The birds of flame bought us enough time to make our way to the door.

“Goodness…”

YuRia quietly muttered as soon as she stepped into the stairwell.

A stream of people flows along the staircase. It’s quite literally a river of humans. They float down the stairwell, their limbs tangled up with each other.

“Detective… Is this the end for us?”

Ezra barely managed to speak.

“Not today…”

I answered faintly.

- Translation Notes

[1] Seonbae (also written Sunbae): A Korean honorific used to address seniors or mentors (older students, experienced athletes, people who’ve worked longer at a business, etc.); it’s almost identical to the Japanese honorific “Senpai”.

Although we typically try to avoid using honorifics in our translations, this is one of the few times where an exception has been made due to

the difficulty of finding a suitable English equivalent.

Chapter 11: The Tide

In this rush, I desperately held onto Ezra and YuRia's hands.

There is a swift torrent of people that looks as though it could carry off anyone who may carelessly tread in it. We're out of options. Our only choice is to let the current take us wherever it may lead to.

"Ezra, YuRia. I need you to trust me."

"Sure thing, chief!"

"Alright."

"We're jumping into this stream."

"Understood."

"What?!"

The difference in attitude is palpable.

I'm the first to step into the river. I was sucked right in as soon as I

immersed a foot ankle-deep into the stream of flesh. As I quickly descend along with the wave, I catch a glimpse of each floor.

The seventh floor, where employees are crawling on all fours, viciously preying on each other.

The sixth floor, where humans folded into cuboid shapes are stacked up.

The fifth floor, where drowned employees are floating in the air.

The fourth floor, where a number of people are offering a human sacrifice to what appears to be a statue of a person who reached nirvana.

The third floor, where the minds of employees are being absorbed by a dark shade.

In the turbulent tide of humans tangled with one another, my consciousness slowly fades. The boundary of consciousness is collapsing. People's Distortions join each other in a large flow, entering

the underground floors. I'm confident that I can keep a firm grip on my sanity. But can Ezra and YuRia retain themselves in this current just the same? My worries soon erode into fragments and drift along the stream. Reminiscences of the past swell up in my mind. Memories of my past missions. Companions I couldn't protect. My incompetence that drove them to their demise. It's as if all my regret and longing is being stirred up. The emotions become one with the flood and float away. In this rush, I desperately held onto Ezra and YuRia's hands.

How far have I gone down? How much time has passed? When I came back to my senses, no one was around me. Where did all the people go? What about Ezra and YuRia? My head is pounding.

'You must be awake by now.'

…A nostalgic yet despicable voice reaches my ear.

'If you're hearing this, that most likely means you're at the fifteenth basement floor of Tae-young Produce Co.'

"You always loved to play silly games like this."

'You must have a lot of questions for me.'

That's a pre-recorded message. Now I see why Han Hee-joon visited my Office recently. I've been playing into his hands all along.

'Indeed. You always trusted me and did every favor I asked of you.'

“I’m guessing you were behind the incident I caused that day as well.”

‘This is not the time for that, though; we have more important questions to address. Why did I leave a message here to “talk” with you? What happened to your adorable assistants? How was I able to use the Distortion to my advantage?’

“I won’t let your cunning words sway me anymore, you sly serpent. It’s my business to take care of my partners... And I decide my own path.”

‘Sure you do. I’m just trying to give you a small heads up. All the anomalies that occurred in this company, they were set up for one reason. I wanted to let you know that I found a clue. About the Distortion you’re chasing after. As you've seen here, I can now harness the Distortion to an extent. Moses, doesn’t this give you a glimmer of hope that you may finally repent for what you did?’

“You know I was already about to go meet you anyway. There was no need to pull this nonsense on us.”

‘But if I didn’t go to such lengths at the very minimum, your hatred toward me wouldn’t have carried much weight at all, now would it?’

“What a paltry concern. I’m carefully preserving all my wrath just for you. Why don’t you prepare a silver platter in the meantime so I can put your head on it.”

Swhirrrr - Click.

‘You must be awake by now. If you’re hearing this, that most likely means you’re at the fifteenth basement floor of Tae-young Produce Co...’

That son of a bitch. He knows how to mess with me too well.

I must focus on finding Ezra and YuRia for now.

Flick! Fluorescent lamps light up the underground space. This was the fifteenth basement floor; it’s entirely surrounded by pure white surfaces.

And Ezra is standing idly in the middle of it.

“Huff… Ezra…”

I took out my smoking pipe and put it in my mouth. Then I placed my hand on my forehead. It looks like Ezra’s Distortion is still within my ability to solve. She seems so tiny and powerless, standing on the opposite side of the room with her head bowed.

“Detective… I couldn’t protect her... This is just like back then… I trusted you, detective…”

YuRia was laid still at Ezra's feet, unconscious.

"Though… I still believe in you, actually…"

YuRia's red ribbon is still tied on to my smoking pipe. I quietly tasted the smoke as I looked up to the ceiling.

Large antlers resembling those of a stag were grown on Ezra's head. Through my eyes, Ezra has always worn a mask on her face. Though, I could never quite tell whether that mask was a true expression of her feelings. But this time, numerous masks are plastered all over her body. The river of Distortions got her in the end.

I suppose solving the Distortion of my precious sidekick is one case I can work on free of charge.

I let in a violet breath.

Chapter 12: Masks

“Let’s dance, Ezra.”

Ezra. A diligent child who has little faith in herself. Ezra wore a different mask every day; I could only read the expression of the mask covering her face. I don’t know what her true expression beneath the mask may be, but I decided to accept what’s shown on Ezra’s mask as her expression. I never bothered to forcefully resolve her Distortion until now.

This time, it’s different. She’s on the verge of losing herself, swept by others’ Distortions. Her entire body is covered in the masks of many others as proof of her perilous state. Ezra prepares a mask for each person she confronts; Ezra prepares an emotion for each mask she wears. I can only begin to fathom the storm raging in her mind.

The fifteenth basement floor. Ezra and I are facing each other in this white room. Loud noises came from Ezra’s masks. Voices of laughter, crying, anger, anxiety, melancholy, distrust, disgust, and joy fill the chamber.

I coiled my violet whip around my hand.

“Let’s dance, Ezra.”

I lashed out at Ezra, my first target: a laughing yellow mask on her right leg. A voice rings in my head when I grapple the mask with my whip.

‘What’s your favorite kinda sandwich, Moses?’

“Mine would be mustard.”

‘Then mustard is my favorite, too!’

I pull the whip to tear off the yellow mask from her body. It makes me feel nauseous. Ezra lets out a scream.

“Please bear with it for just a bit.”

The red mask on Ezra’s left shoulder gives out a screech. Ezra grabs the whip and pulls me toward her. I released the tension in my body. In a moment’s notice, I’m sent flying in her direction.

‘Rrraaaaaaahhh!!! I’ll kill them all! I’ll break everyone who’s got to die!’

Ezra swings her fist at me as I’m being dragged toward her in the air. Using the momentum of the pull, I managed to propel my body away from her fist’s path. I wrap the whip around Ezra’s body and jump onto her shoulders. Then I grab the red mask with my hand to tear it off.

“Use violence only when it’s necessary.”

Shrieking, the red mask is ripped out and thrown to the ground. My hand turned red from the searing heat of the mask. Ezra struggled hard, crushing me onto the floor in the process. I feel a sore pain. A bone or ten must have gotten a crack.

“Hnngh… It cost a fortune to get my back fixed…”

I confronted Ezra’s masks and tore them off one by one; with every mask I removed from her, a burst of Ezra’s emotions came forth. An ice-cold mask, a mask that eats away the mind, a mask with rusted nails hammered into it…

“These are not your true emotions. They’re facades, faces that you want other people to see of you.”

I was scalded, bled from splinters, got frostbites, and threw up from sickness.

Only one mask remained.

It’s sadness. The absolute last mask of Ezra’s that I wanted to face.

“I couldn’t save them! That time, I… I couldn’t protect them all… I’m so sad.”

The blue mask embedded in the center of Ezra’s chest is crying, tears falling from its eyes.

“No, dear… That sadness isn’t yours. The emotion was forced upon you by others. If you aren’t feeling sad, there’s no need to make yourself feel sad no matter how others look at you.”

“But I’m really feeling sad, though?”

“You aren’t sad because you couldn’t save everyone that day…”

It was an excruciating task to bring myself to speak the next part, but I continued on nonetheless.

“…You’re sad that I’m bearing regret for what happened.”

The mask opened its mouth and began wailing loudly. My head felt like it was on the verge of bursting from hearing its cry. An unstoppable stream of tears started falling from my eyes.

Crashatter

The mask broke apart, and several shards were stuck in my chest. The wounds bled tears instead of blood.

Ezra was back to her usual self. She’s knelt down, staring into the floor.

I slowly walked over to her.

“It’s over now, dear.”

And gently caressed her head.

“Sob, sob… detective, I’m sorry…”

Ezra whimpered.

The next issue at hand is YuRia. She seems to be in a perilous condition as well. Although she doesn’t seem to have been afflicted with the torrent of Distortions, judging from the state of her body…

I placed my hand on my forehead and whiffed my pipe.

Chapter 13: Teddy Bear

“I want to see the same scenery as you do.”

There is little I know about YuRia as a person.

This child and I have one thing in common, however.

I do not see any distortion from YuRia.

YuRia was lying on the floor with her eyes closed. I open her eyelid to check if the pupil responds. This isn’t an ordinary coma; her self has been detached… I've seen this kind of condition before. The body is alive, but the mind is dead. Thankfully, her brain is still functional. There’s still a chance.

“Ezra! Bring me a scalpel, sterilized. I need one that can cut through bone.”

“Roger! You’re gonna perform the operation I’m thinking of, right? I’ll take out the stasis preservation cube in that case.”

“Yes, we’re extracting her brain.”

I pulled a pair of sterile gloves out of the inner pocket of my coat and

snapped them on.

“Are you guys insane?!”

A small noise tickles my ears. It’s YuRia’s voice.

“Over here! I’m here!”

“Ah…! Detective!!! The teddy’s moving…!”

The teddy bear strapped to YuRia’s waist was wiggling its body.

“Ladies. Could you please keep my brain inside my head? And release me from this belt while you’re at it.”

“Okie dokie!”

Sigh… What have we gotten ourselves into this time. It appears that YuRia’s consciousness has carried over to that doll somehow. I fixed my sight upon the small plush dusting itself down as I smoked from my pipe.

“I’ve never experienced this kind of stuff before. Although I do have a guess.”

The teddy bear crossed its arms. Ezra looked flustered by the sight.

“This teddy bear is the same type of object as your pipe; in other words, it belongs to me and me alone. You can tell this much, right?”

“Which means it’s something that responds to your emotions.”

“That’s right. When I was being swept away by that gross tide, it felt like the thoughts of other people were invading my head. I wanted to run from those thoughts by any means, that’s when my teddies surrounded me and kept me safe.”

“In summary, an act of a bizarre force transferred your mind from your body into that teddy bear.”

“Mhm. That looks to be the case. After all, these tools of ours resonate with our emotions.”

“…So, do you know how to come back?”

“Nope.”

“…You’re admitting it quite boldly.”

“Isn’t this exciting, rather? We’re opening a new horizon. This phenomenon… is worth analyzing further. We’ll have a lot to talk about when we head back.”

As she says, there will be much to discuss with each other now. If we can safely get back, that is…

“Ezra! Carry YuRia’s body.”

Putting a person in a dimensional bag could have unforeseen consequences.

“Got it!”

Ezra lifted YuRia’s lifeless body and took it under her arm.

“Please handle it carefully, seonbae.”

“Yup-yup!”

“YuRia, would you like to get inside a pocket?”

“Please put me on your shoulder, Detective Moses. I want to see the same scenery as you do.”

I put my hand to my forehead and whiffed my pipe. Sigh… Who could’ve known that I’d be doing something like this in my life. I bent down to pick up the teddy bear, and placed it on my left shoulder.

“Ohmygosh… Detective! That looks sooo good on you!”

Ezra hopped in excitement. That won’t help heal her wounds.

“Since both of you are safe and sound now, albeit in different shapes, let’s figure out how to escape this underground warehouse.”

“Got it!”

“Understood.”

It’ll take some time to get used to someone speaking right in my ear. Knowing where the river of Distortions disappeared to would provide a crucial clue for the way out. There’s no exit or drain to be found in this white room. I carefully felt around the wall and knocked on it. The wall seems to be made with a material that feels like glass panes used in laboratories. Figures…

“Hey! I know you’re watching us from behind that wall, pal. I believe it’s time you explained what’s going on here.”

Clap. Clap. Clap.

I hear someone clapping.

“Detective! Behind you..!”

Ezra shouted.

The wall turns translucent, revealing a dark silhouette standing behind it.

“Excellent, Moses. You managed to reach this place in one piece. And you ultimately drove us into this corner. You are a capable person, I will admit. You even saved your colleagues and kept yourself alive on top of that. Thanks to you, our company has effectively gone bankrupt.”

“What is a produce company in the Backstreets doing, meddling with creatures? Was it a secret weapons supplier in disguise?”

“It’s a humble company with dreams, that’s all. Tae-young Produce Co. was an ambitious firm that aimed to become a Wing.”

“It’s true that there’s a vacant spot in the ranks of the Wings ever since L Corp. in the south fell. That’s still a huge dream to have, I must say.”

YuRia pointed out.

“One should dream big, as they say. Through a remarkably difficult and taxing process… We acquired a lead on Lobotomy Corp’s Singularity, after paying a great price. About Enkephalin, the so-called

eco friendly energy.”

“…Enkephalin?”

Distortion and energy… A combination I couldn’t have possibly imagined. And they mentioned Lobotomy Corporation, a former Wing, out of the blue. What is this person talking about?

“I’m sure you have many things you’d like to know. Now, let me do you a favor and answer one question of yours, whatever it may be. It’s the prize for making it here alive, and a reward for leading our company to ruin.”

Huff… My head is pounding, my body about to crumble. My broken ribs ache. My burnt hand stings. My left cheek is freezing. The blood leaking from my chest is losing warmth. So many things happened to us today. Ezra stands next to me, carrying YuRia’s body. She seemed to be barely holding onto her consciousness. She’s bled so badly that a puddle of blood was forming beneath her feet. Usually, I would’ve asked who they are, where they brought that odd box from, and what exactly has happened in this company, however...

“…Sigh. I don’t have time for any more of your horseshit and conspiracies. All we want is to leave this place and rest. I’m not interested in anything else right now.”

“Are you sure you’re going to be okay with that? Opportunities like this won’t come often.”

“I am.”

I answered as I puffed smoke from the pipe.

“That’s a shame. But if you insist.”

Zii-iing

The walls of the white room split apart to reveal an elevator.

“You can use the lift back there. There’s no tricks or traps placed there to harm you, so fret not. If killing you all was our goal, you would’ve been dead meat far before you could get here.”

I can’t be bothered to tell if they’re speaking the truth.

“Let’s go, Ezra.”

“Yes, chief!”

We took the elevator. This hellish day is coming to an end at last. I want to get back to my home immediately, get treated, and lie down. I’m sure Ezra shares my sentiment. And I have many things to discuss with YuRia. I imagine there’ll be a ton of things to clear up once we head back.

The elevator’s doors are closing.

The silhouetted person muttered in the back.

“I’ve lost…”

Are they talking to themself?

“You… ri….”

Who is that person talking to?

“…Dias..”

As soon as I hear that word, my eyes open wide. Blood and rage rush to my head. I must ask that bastard what they meant when they spoke that word. The doors aren’t completely shut yet. My body acts before rationality could have a say. I sprang for them.

“Detective Moses! What’s wrong?!”

YuRia jumped down from my shoulder.

Right as YuRia landed on the floor, Ezra stood in my way and harshly blocked me as if she were preparing for this. And she struck me on the back of my neck.

“Sorry… Detective… We’ve got to live first…”

I fainted, collapsing into Ezra’s embrace.

Chapter 14: Psychoment

“YuRia, know that I’m going to sincerely and thoroughly exploit you from this moment onward.”

“You shouldn’t have stopped me!”

I snapped at Ezra with my pipe in my mouth. The two of us are facing each other, sitting at the table of our Office.

“…But! There was no reason to risk your life for info about that person, detective! You’ll be leaving to see her in two weeks anyway!”

Ezra yelled at me in an emotional voice, as if she was about to break into tears.

“Sigh…”

Tsk, no use lamenting over a missed opportunity. My hand made its way up to my forehead and I breathed out a chain of smoke.

“Now, now. Don’t lose your cool over it, ladies. It’s fortunate enough that we escaped that hellish company alive.”

After wrapping bandages around my injuries, YuRia climbed down to

the table to calm us.

“Detective Moses, your wounds have been all bandaged up. And don’t forget to take this HP tablet before going to bed tonight.”

The teddy bear places a pill in front of me.

“And here’s yours, seonbae.”

YuRia waddled across the table and put one in front of Ezra as well.

“…Thanks.”

Ezra dropped her head.

I suppose I should change the topic.

“YuRia. Why don’t you tell me what happened with your body.”

“Okay. Well, I guess it’s time to talk about that. Much like your smoking pipe, this plushie doll is an object that responds to emotions; I call these instruments: ‘Psychoment’.”

“Equipment that’s powered by the soul, huh.”

“That’s the gist of it. I know it’s silly that a workshop meister is talking about souls and spirituality when my job is all about technology, but those are the facts. After seeing you battle that monstrous giant in the underground warehouse of Tae-young Produce Co, and having my

self transferred to this teddy-bear Psychoment, I've become sure of this."

"What was the ribbon you tied to my smoking pipe? I never created flaming birds with my pipe before."

"That's an experimental work of mine; I tried decorating your Psychoment a little. Simply put, Psychoment holds more potential than any other piece of equipment that has existed up to now. Can you believe that someone could manifest personalized gear just by having a strong determination or feeling? If Psychoment became more accessible to the City's denizens, it would shift the ecology of the City and its workshops. I'm focusing on enhancing the Psychoment by sculpting and decorating them. One type of Psychoment are tools or objects materialized from emotions that can be directly used, such as your smoking pipe; another type is remote-controlled Psychoment such as mine. Then again, I've only seen five Psychoment so far. Since I've gotten to see only a few, much of it is still a mystery to me."

"You mean you've seen others with it?"

"Yes. But yours was by far the most impressive Psychoment I've seen, if I'm being honest. That red cylinder you summoned in the underground warehouse… It could erase space itself. I'd never seen such a powerful Psychoment before. I knew I chose the right person."

I gently closed my eyes and recalled the memories of that moment.

"You can't see what you call the 'Distortion' in me, can you, detective?"

I nodded in acknowledgement.

"According to my theory, Psychoment is the Distortion physically

removed from a person. That's why the Distortion can't be seen in people who own a Psychoment, like you and me."

"…Makes sense."

"It's my turn now. How did you get your hands on that smoking pipe, Detective Moses?"

YuRia asked, crossing her arms.

"Do you really wish to know? If you try to dig into me any deeper than this… You might end up entangled forever. Isn't that right, Ezra?"

Ezra gave a silent agreement.

"I swore to devote my whole life to Psychoment."

"Your whole life… Huukay."

I took a smoky breath.

"I happen to be wondering the same thing as you. Why this smoking pipe ended up in my hand... How come I know how to use this damn thing… The memories are scattered into pieces, and the emotions are in a muddle."

And I breathed it out.

"That's why I'm chasing after the Distortion. We're going to leave soon to find out that truth. I'll go on a trip that I won't ever come back from."

"…So you really don't know yourself."

YuRia spoke in a disappointed tone.

“I want to know it more desperately than anyone. The cursed phenomenon and this damned pipe have made me suffer too many sacrifices. YuRia, know that I’m going to sincerely and thoroughly exploit you from this moment onward.”

“You’re more than welcome if it means I can learn more about your Psychoment and the emotions that form it. Please use me to your heart’s content.”

YuRia extended her plush arm for a handshake. I couldn’t help but give a chuckle as I held the teddy bear’s little hand and shook it gently.

“Well then, I suppose it’s time to hit the proverbial hay. Tomorrow will be another day.”

I nudged the chair backwards and stood up.

“Remember to take your HP tablet, Detective Moses.”

“I will. Ezra, are you going to stay up for a while longer?”

“…Yeah. I wanna talk with YuRia for a bit.”

“Alright. I should give the youth some alone time together after all. I’ll go to bed first, then.”

Ezra lightly nodded at me.

“Good night, detective.”

- Translation Notes:

The neologism ‘Psychoment’ is intended to reflect the compound word created by the author: 신비(神備; Sinbi). The English translation combines the prefix ‘psycho-’ (taken from Ancient Greek ψῡχή; psukhḗ) to denote a relation to the soul or mind, and the suffix -ment to indicate that it is an instrument/equipment. The original Korean leans a bit more towards the soul/spirit connotation rather than the mind, but can mean either.

Chapter 15: Vespa Crabro

“…And who could that taboo-breaking idiot be?”

The midday sun was shining overhead and over bed when I woke up. I’d slept for a while, hadn’t I. I barely managed to get up and unwind the bandages around my body. It seems most of my injuries healed up overnight, thanks to the HP tablet I took. The first thing I saw as I opened the door and to leave the room was Ezra having lunch at the table.

“Detective! Did you have a good rest?”

Ezra cheerfully greets me from her seat. She was back to her usual, lively self, having shaken off all the fatigue and gloom that was weighing her down yesterday.

“Yeah. Is your body alright?”

“Yep! I’m totally peppy now! What would you like for lunch, detective?”

“I don’t feel like eating.”

My pipe made its way back into its usual position, and I headed to the terrace. There’s quite a few things I need to look into.

“Ezra, is YuRia in her room?”

“Mhm! She said she’s gonna inspect the black box we brought from Tae-young Produce Co.”

I do like her tendency to take the initiative.

“Enjoy your lunch, Ezra.”

“Kay~!”

Leaving Ezra with her meal, I headed for YuRia’s room. Loud noises were coming from the door.

Knock, knock.

I knocked on YuRia’s door.

“YuRia! Mind if I come in?”

“No. Be my guest.”

When I opened the door, a familiar stairway met my eyes. It’s the same set of stairs that I took when I first visited YuRia Atelier. The room I gave to YuRia didn’t have any stairs nor did it have space for them. It was structurally impossible for stairs to be there. Perhaps this is one of the effects of Psychoment, as YuRia calls it. I walked down the stairs, thankfully with no bears aggressively jumping at me this time. The corridor is decorated with ribbons that vividly show off YuRia’s taste. I wonder if she adorned it herself or ordered her teddy bears to do the job. I reached the hall at the end of the corridor. The space feels smaller than last time. It’s rather compact, even. Eight teddy bears stood around the workbench, busily engaging in craft work

as sparks flew off.

“You’re here, detective.”

One of the teddy bears turned around to greet me.

“I don’t remember giving you the permission to modify the Office building at your will. I still have many more months of rent to pay for the leased space.”

“Don’t worry, Detective Moses. I can revert it anytime.”

“You mean to tell me this space is part of your Psychoment?”

“Yes. It’s my own atelier. I can freely control the teddy bears according to my will here.”

“So, did you find a way to go back to your original body?”

“…No. It seems to be sealed tight. There’s still too little we know about Psychoment. Finding a way back to my old body is one of the things that we’ll have to figure out.”

YuRia casually spoke as if it didn’t matter too much to her.

“What will happen if something goes wrong with your original body?”

“If my vital functions ceased and my brain stopped, I would probably die. My speculation is that Psychoment requires the user’s mind to exist for it to work. But it’s not like I can try crushing my own body to test this hypothesis.”

“How do you handle having meals with that body?”

“I should be alright as long as my body out there is put on a life support machine. This teddy bear can move fine without eating anything. It’s my brain that requires nutrition, rather.”

YuRia shook her head.

“I’m more concerned about this black box; I’ve never seen this type of material. That person from Tae-young Produce Co. mentioned L Corp. I’m thinking it might have something to do with its Singularity.”

“Are you implying that a Wing’s Singularity has been leaked?”

“Well, it collapsed anyway.”

Remnants of a Singularity… There have been a few cases of a Singularity coming off patent after the Wing holding it breaks.

“Or someone could have scavenged one of the sealed branches. Or got all the way into the headquarters, perhaps.”

“YuRia, I’m more interested in learning about the functions and working principles of that box.”

“I can tell you what it does. This box sucks in people’s psyche. Or their Distortions, to be exact.”

“…Is it some kind of Psychoment?”

“Basically. From what I’ve seen, at least. It could be a Psychoment belonging to someone… Or one formed from artificially created minds and emotions.”

Creating minds and emotions… An action that is considered a taboo…

“We’ll ultimately have to learn more about the Distortion and what you call Psychoment.”

YuRia naturally climbed onto my shoulder.

“That’s why you’re going on a long trip, right?”

“…Speaking of, what should we do with your body when we leave?”

“Mmm… That’s an issue I’m still pondering over. I’ve been tinkering with a few ideas. But for now, we should focus on chasing the Distortion. We already have a few requests waiting to be read.”

YuRia held her arm to point at the exit. This tiny teddy’s growing more brazen with each passing day.

“Sure, let us have a look.”

I left the room to find a visitor in our Office. The atmosphere was ominous. Ezra’s sitting on the sofa and facing the guest, looking as anxious as she can be. I can see his back from here; a bright yellow jacket embroidered with a black hornet. A couple of weapons lay next to him. Having the gall to wear such a blindingly obtrusive color means that he has that much confidence in his skills. Is it a member of a Syndicate? Or a Fixer? The guest noticed my presence and turned his head to look at me. Then a deep voice came from his mouth.

“A pleasure to meet you, Doctor Moses.”

“Ezra, who is this person? He doesn’t appear to be a client looking to give us a request, hm?”

I adjusted the positioning of my pipe slightly.

“Detective! That’s… This is…”

Ezra floundered.

“Let me introduce myself.”

The man got up from his chair and turned to me, resuming his speech.

“I am Vespa. Vespa Crabro; Fixer working under the direct command of N Corp, and a taboo hunter.”

Taboo… Dammit, this reminds me that this sly little bear YuRia recorded us the first time we met. Now, she was doing her best to act like a lifeless plushie on my shoulder.

“I’ve received reports that Moses’ Office should know about a certain person who violated the taboo of District 14.”

“…And who could that taboo-breaking idiot be?”

I asked, puffing away on my pipe.

“YuRia of YuRia Atelier. That’s the name of the violator.”

He answered, fiddling with the hilt of his sword wrapped in yellow cloth.

“…Have you seen her?”

“No…”

“Several people on the street have testified that they saw you enter

YuRia Atelier.”

“Do you have concrete evidence? Oh, right. Recording footage was forbidden in District 14, wasn’t it?”

Vespa closed his eyes for a moment. He seemed to be absorbed in thought. He soon opened his eyes and spoke to me.

“…Thank you for your cooperation. If you ever happen to witness YuRia, please mail me at this address.”

He handed me his business card.

“I will, Mr. Vespa. Ezra, our guest is leaving!”

“Kay, detective!”

Ezra rose from her sofa-seat to open the Office’s door for our departing guest. As Vespa walked past me, he whispered into my ear.

“That’s quite a cute plush toy on your shoulder.”

“…Why, thank you.”

Vespa briefly stopped at the entrance and gave us a nod before closing the door.

“Ezra, start packing up. Now.”

I calmly spoke.

Chapter 16: Dou Gui Combat Office

We just need to hold out for two weeks.

An ordinary hotel in District 14. I checked in to the most average room with two beds I could ask for. Ezra and I sat on a bed, YuRia's old body lay on the other. And next to me is YuRia in her plush doll body.

"Isn't it way too humid in here? My cotton's gonna get moldy."

You sly teddy bear. Perhaps she knowingly broke the taboo as a means to keep us hostage. I'd bonk her on the head if it could hurt her. We left our Office to escape the taboo hunter's eyes. He most certainly noticed that we were hiding something as soon as he met us. Those kinds of Fixers simply can't be avoided. Although, how come they immediately send a Fixer that appears to be at least a Grade 2 after us? It's not common for a Wing to dispatch a Fixer under its command to deal with something as trivial as filming a fight in the Backstreets.

"…YuRia, do you happen to have a previous track record of breaking taboos?"

"……"

“Well, YuRia. I guess this is the end of our relationship.”

“Junior… It was fun while it lasted!”

“Ladies. Like it or not, we’re all in the same boat already.”

“Tell me why the two of us should risk our lives to protect you. Our own come before investigating Distortions or Psychoment. And what’s chasing us right now is neither. We’re not running a combat-oriented Office.”

“It’s all for Psychoment, of course. I rewatched the videos of you using the smoking pipe and the giant emerging from that black box countless times. That’s how I could make many theoretical advancements in our research.”

“Whaat! Don’t tell me, the glasses we wore there were actually…? Detective! I never asked her to put any kind of recording function in the glasses!”

Ezra waved her hands and shook her head. That cheeky little bear… I put my hand to my forehead.

“You mean everything that happened in Tae-young Produce Co. that day was recorded?”

“Yes. Until the disgusting river took the glasses off of your faces, that is.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“…I was scared you’d kick me out. You would’ve at least stopped me if you knew. But, if I didn’t make any record of Psychoment or the

Distortions… This research wouldn't go anywhere. That's why I was quiet about it."

"Yes, that's fine and all… but YuRia."

I put a hand on the teddy bear's head and pet it.

"Remember, if you hide details that could put us in mortal peril one more time… Then I'll part company with you for real."

"…Understood, Detective Moses."

"Yes, that's a good girl."

"Alright, Ezra… Tell me your first impressions of Vespa."

Ezra has a keen sense when it comes to combat. Since she enjoys fighting, she's excellent at discerning a strong opponent from a weak one.

"Can't beat him!"

Ezra declared that outright. Ezra is honest when she says she's no match for someone.

"That person reeked of blood. He's probably fought more battles than I can count. He might be stronger than Hee-joon seonbae, too!"

Which means he's definitely Grade 2 or above… One who is an expert in murder at that…

"Umm, Detective Moses. Can't you defeat him with your Psychoment? Your smoking pipe could take down the gigantic skeleton the other day."

This kid seems to be mistaking me with the Red Mist.

"YuRia, confronting humans is a different issue. There's a fundamental contrast between a Distortion filled with naught but murderous intent and a person who was trained in the art of killing. A person like Vespa who has overcome numerous life and death situations won't give me any time to breathe into my smoking pipe. He'd slice my arm off or break it before I could take a single peep."

"What if Ezra seonbae earned you some time just like the last time?"

"Junior, I'm not sure I can stall that guy at all."

Silence fills the room. Only the sound of the ventilator fan disturbs the stillness.

"If we can't fight the hornet head on, we'll have to outsmart him. The best way would be to avoid having to fight him altogether."

"The first thing I can think of is fleeing District 14."

YuRia suggests, crossing her arms.

"A simple idea, but sadly not foolproof. There's two weeks of time until

we can take the WARP train with the tickets we received. The taboo hunter could catch up with us easily if we just drove along the road."

"Detective! I got one! I got one!"

Ezra raises her hand and waves it.

"Go ahead."

"Maybe we should hire a super duper strong Fixer to fight for us!"

"Yeah… Hopefully they'll buy us enough time to run. Do you have any personal connections with Grade 1 or 2 Fixers who specialize in combat, Ezra?"

"Hmmnng… Nooo…"

"I'm doubtful they'll take our request in the first place, even if there were any. Opposing a Fixer who directly belongs to a Wing essentially means opposing that Wing."

"Detective! That means he'll stop bothering us once we meet up with Hee-joon seonbae in District 11! Right?"

"…It'll certainly be less trouble for us if we can pass the buck on him."

We just need to hold out for two weeks. I need to find someone who can buy us that much time.

"Ezra, do you have the most recent issue of the monthly Fixer Office catalogue?"

"Of course I do!"

Ezra rummaged through her pockets and handed over the paper book she found. I skimmed through the catalogue densely packed with advertisements and promotional phrases for all sorts of Offices, carefully scanning the section for combat-oriented ones. There's one useful-looking Office that's not too far from here. 'Dou Gui Combat Office'. A Grade 2 Office. Unaffiliated with any Association. 17 members. Operates 24 hours a day, open year-round. Normally, it's extremely risky to use an Office with no assurance from any Association. It could be linked to dangerous Syndicates. But in times like these, it's a perfect pawn for us. They won't ask what's going on, all they ask for is money.

"Ezra. I'll go outside for a bit."

"Okie-dokie! I'll get my gear!"

"No, I want you to stay here and keep YuRia's body safe."

"Gasp! But detective…! It's dangerous to go alone… And it's late evening, too…!"

"Don't worry, Ezra. You're very reliable to have around, and I'd love to take you with me if I could, but I'm leaving you here so you can keep YuRia safe. I'm counting on you."

"Okay…"

Ezra answered, hanging her head.

"I'll be back as soon as I sign the contract."

YuRia hopped on to my shoulder, and I left the hotel room.

An evening street lit by the setting sun. Achromatic, Distorted people are on their way home from work, their heads turned downward. The scenery is the same as ever. People stroll the streets, bearing Distortions that look similar to one another but not quite the same. I reckon these scenes will forever remain this way.

A crude signboard that reads ‘Dou Gui Combat Office’ is hanging outside a two-story building. The light on the sign was flickering, suggesting that it has endured many years. This building seems even more dilapidated than our humble Office. I took the stairs to the second floor. When I opened the door, I was greeted with the sound of a chime and a fusty stench.

“Guys! We got company!”

Followed by someone’s loud voice, people in the Office extinguished the cigarettes in their hands and started bustling about organizing the space.

“Here, please take a seat, ma’am.”

A person who appears to be a deskjobber led me to a seat. There’s not a single room separated with walls in this Office space that appears to be around 20-pyeong in area. The floor was a plain surface of grey cement, not covered in any flooring at all. I parked myself on the seat and took my smoking pipe out of the inner pocket of my coat. Is this really a Grade 2 Office? Where do all their earnings go if none of that money is being spent on the Office interior?

“Doesn’t look like someone who’d usually come to a place like ours… Got someone you want to see dead?”

The man sitting on a sofa with a haughty posture talked to me, scratching his head. This sunglasses-wearing person seemed to be the boss of the Office.

“I’m here to give you a request.”

“Well, you do look like you’re wealthy enough to afford our service… And you seem pretty old too, I wonder what’s your business coming all the way to our Office… Let me guess, you got a problem with inheriting your fortune to your kids or something? Gahahahah!”

As the boss bursts out laughing, the Office crew laugh along. Talk about an utter lack of dignity.

“What do ya think we are, some kinda shabby local Office made outta hicks? We’ve been through hell n’ high water. Say, lemme have a look at your business card if you got one.”

I took my card out of my coat pocket and handed it to him. He briefly lifts the sunglasses to scan through my card. His two eye sockets are empty. A Distortion; not a severe one, though.

“Moses’ Office… Mysteries n’ unsolved cases… Seven Association affiliate… Some weird schtick you’re up to.”

He put a serious look on his face. He stared to the floor for a moment before looking back at me.

“Name’s Zhang Lei. I’m the rep of this Office.”

He gave me his business card. Zhang Lei, representative of Dou Gui Office. “Grade 2 Fixer” is written in rough handwriting as a note of his current status.

“Let’s get straight to the point. What does a brainy Office want with us?”

“I want you to protect my Office for two weeks. I’ll pay you as much as you want.”

“Made an enemy of someone, eh. Happens pretty often, don’t it?”

The Fixers in the Office collectively nodded.

“So, how many escorts do you want?”

“Every Fixer in your Office.”

“Bahahaha! Must’ve made one huge fuss, haven’t cha!”

“Once again, you’ll get enough payment to compensate.”

“Who’re we facing?”

“……”

I remained silent.

“You smoke?”

“Oh, I love smoking.”

“Let’s take a moment to talk alone on the rooftop.”

Smoking a cigarette, Zhang Lei looked up at the sky. A forest of buildings are surrounding the landscape. Night fell in the streets already.

“So, uh, your job is to solve weird n’ odd incidents?”

I nodded, smoking with my pipe.

“You see, I have a kid. Problem is, she’s shut herself in her room and just won’t leave.”

“…You’re giving me a request now?”

“…People’s gotta help each other out, ma’am. Maybe it’s just my thick head, but something beyond my comprehension is going on in my house. If you can solve this problem, I guarantee you’ll have my whole Office keeping you safe.”

“Can I get a discount on the request fee, then?”

“Bahaha! Come on, aren’t we doing you a huge favor by not asking who we’re up against? Now you’re just being greedy.”

I laughed with him. Yeah, right, Ezra’s a much better negotiator than I am.

“Can you offer an escort right now, in that case? The location is room 1306 in the business hotel on Chili Street.”

“A few useful guys will be on their way to that address right away.”

“Good, I’ll hear more about the strange happenings in your house as we head to your home.”

“Well, that’s a deal then, yeah?”

I nodded and shook hands with Zhang Lei. Tobacco smoke billowed from the roof for a good while.

Chapter 17: Aquarium

A shrill shriek strikes my ears immediately.

Zhang Lei led the way to his house. It's not too uncommon for a child to lock themselves in their room these days; the cause must be a trauma of some kind. This problem is highly likely to be related to the Distortion in that case.

"…Besides, weird noises are coming from my daughter's room every night."

"Maybe you should have some more respect for a kid's privacy?"

"Haha… It's nothing of that sort, ma'am. I've killed a whole lotta people in my life. I know the sounds of tearing flesh and breaking bones all too well. It's that gruesome and morbid noise… Something that shouldn't be heard from a kid's room, seeping out along with my daughter's screams."

"I'm sure you have tried forcefully opening the door, am I correct?"

"Sure I have. But whenever I grab the doorknob or try to break the whole door, it always pushes me away. And the noise would get louder and more bruising the harder I tried to open that door. I'm in a rough spot where I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't."

“How old is your child? How long has it been since she locked herself in?”

“Seventeen. She’s been in there for almost eight months now.”

“College entrance must be a concern as well if she’s stuck in there instead of studying for it at school.”

“You see, my daughter Fei’s attending a virtual school. She’s never missed a class until now, and her grades were fine last I checked.”

Virtual schooling. Students take lessons in a virtual space. It’s a type of school preferred by parents who value the safety of their kids since they don’t have to pass by potentially dangerous alleyways to get to school, an advantage shared by boarding schools. A parent like him who engages in violent work would especially pay more attention to their child’s well-being.

“And there’s one other thing my brain just can’t understand.”

“What would that be?”

“Water’s leaking through the door. I dunno if it’s blood or sea water, but some kinda liquid is flowing out bit by bit.”

I put my hand on my forehead and whiffed my pipe. A Distortion that has already materialized… That makes it a lot trickier to resolve. I’ll have to see for myself how severe it is.

Zhang Lei’s house was located in the residential area of the Backstreets. It’s one of the safest places outside of the Nest. A

complex of 30-story apartments lined up like packs of cigarettes. It's akin to a cage for chickens. I followed Zhang Lei into an elevator. The lift slowly rises, creaking and rattling. His house is on the eighteenth floor. As the elevator doors opened, lamps in the hallway detected our presence and flickered on. Zhang Lei took a key out of his pocket to open the door to unit 1807. Creeaak. The door opens with a sharp grating sound, and an unlit hall greets us.

"You live alone?"

"Hahaha. Everyone has their stories, ma'am."

Zhang Lei forced a bitter laugh.

"Kiyaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhh!"

A shrill shriek strikes my ears immediately afterwards. Zhang Lei let out a sigh.

"…That's the sound I was talking about."

"Your daughter's name was Fei, was it?"

"Mmhm."

I walked to the room where the scream came from. What I was faced with was a giant aquarium in red. The door had disappeared. The room was full of red water, about to overflow. Colorful aquatic plants lined the interior, gleaming in the light shining from above as though there were a hole in the ceiling leading to the sky. And the silhouette of something massive is slowly drifting afar.

"Check this out. Red water leaking from the door, just like what I told

ya.”

It seems Zhang Lei can’t see what’s in this room. That means the materialization is not yet complete.

“We’re both in luck. This seems to be the case of a phenomenon I’m an expert on.”

“That so? I’m counting on your help, doc.”

Zhang Lei bowed low to me.

“I have one thing to ask of you: I need you to trust me no matter what I do from here on out. What’s about to happen won’t be anything normal.”

He nodded. Standing before the room, I took a deep breath. This would get my mind as wet as a drowned rat. I held my smoking pipe in my mouth.

This red water is a manifestation of depression. I let out a white breath, which turned into a cloudy mist that shrouded me. I remember taking a similar request before. If I went into that room unprepared, I would drown in the melancholy of Fei. The white veil surrounding me protects me from such mental corrosion. Being soaked in someone’s sadness is a dysphoric experience comparable to no other. I touched the barrier of water.

“Fei, I’m going in.”

I took a step into the room. My ears submerge along with the rest of

my body, cutting me off from all external sounds. The inside is closer to a lake than a sea. It's filled with fresh water, not sea water. The water isn't salty; this child's sadness isn't the briny, tear jerking kind.

"You can talk now, YuRia."

YuRia jumped out of my coat pocket. I put her on my shoulder.

"Phew… That was so suffocating."

Because a taboo hunter is after us, I forbade YuRia from speaking in most occasions. Him or others could be eavesdropping on us any moment.

"This space… It's quite similar to your workshop, isn't it?"

"It certainly is. It's much bigger on the inside, too. There might be something guarding this place, like the muscle bears in my atelier. You don't have Ezra seonbae to protect you this time, so you'd better be careful."

It's been quite a long while since I worked on a case without Ezra's help, now that I think about it. If it weren't for her, I would be long dead before I could solve half of the cases I've dealt with. I'm guessing she got bored and fell asleep alone in the hotel room by now.

"This place is so eerie, yet beautiful."

"Yeah… We should practice extra caution with beautiful Distortions."

The sound of laughter echoes from somewhere. I exhaled a red breath. The pipe assumed the form of a sharp, crimson blade.

“Detective. I just heard a sound coming from over there.”

“Faint laughter underwater…”

YuRia pointed to the right. When a sound is heard in a mysterious place, should I approach the sound’s source or move away from it… It’s a problem I still don’t have a definite answer to, even after doing my job for so long. I’ll have to trust my intuition in the end. I walked toward where the sound came from.

“YuRia, is there anything you can do to assist me in that body?”

“Afraid not.”

Tsk, you bold-faced little plushie.

“You just cursed at me in your mind, didn’t you? While I can’t assist you directly, I can provide you with a bunch of prototypes I’ve brought. I tried making ribbons for each color. If you have a function you’d like to use, just tell me and I’ll tie up your pipe with the right ribbon.”

“What kind of functions can I expect?”

“Well, there’s quite a diverse range of functions and they mostly depend on your emotions, so I can’t give you the details there. You can just ask me for the feelings you need right away.”

“I’ll look forward to it.”

Ask for the feelings I want. I’m not sure if that’s the right attitude for a technician to have.

“How do you usually solve cases like this, Detective Moses?”

“I should figure out the cause. After all, there is a reason for everything. I trace along clues one by one, such as why this room is full of water, why the color is red, why it isn’t salt water, until I can identify what’s at the root of the Distortion.”

“Does this count as a severe case of Distortion?”

“…Maybe.”

Every person is different; thus, every person’s Distortion is different. I cannot begin to fathom the depth of the trench that is the human mind. Therefore, it’s difficult to judge a Distortion’s nature hastily. I’ll have to knock on their minds and confront them myself to find out. Which is frankly an exceedingly tiring work. Repeating such thoughts, I kept walking forward before I finally reached the culprit behind the laughter.

It's mermaids, as I expected.

Chapter 18: A Carp and Mermaids

The carp sings, crying.

They're mermaids with the body of koi. The faces of humans on the bodies of colored carp. Their long hair flutters.

"That big dumb fish was singing again, it's like she can't take a hint at all."

"Don't you think it's lame how she writes cringy lyrics to sing with that voice?"

"I would've been a much better singer if I was born that size, don't you think so too?"

Three mermaids are sitting around, loudly chatting with each other. Their eye sockets are empty, just like Zhang Lei's. Perhaps there's a linkage to be found between them. The three merfolk appear to be communicating with their voices alone, unable to see each other. One of the striking features of the merfolk is the power in their voice. Every merperson I've seen in my job possessed an ability related to voice, one type or another. And the ability of these merfolk here seems rather straightforward. The words they loudly chatter become red thorns as they escape their mouths. The thorns are then shot towards somewhere. Some time later, a sound could be heard from a distance.

“Mind if I join in on your conversation? Someone is singing out there, I reckon?”

“Who are you? Excuse me, but we weren’t talking to you?”

“Geez, what’s a stranger doing listening in on us…”

“You were talking and laughing so loudly, we couldn’t help but hear it.”

Crossing her arms, YuRia rebutted.

“It’s still a rude thing to eavesdrop on others. We’re just talking by ourselves. Mind your own business.”

“Sheesh, what a scary world. We can’t even talk in peace.”

“I apologize. We didn’t intend to overhear it. Please understand that our ears had no choice other than to pick up the sound traveling through the water.”

“We need to know what’s going on in this place.”

YuRia added.

“Did you come from above?”

One of the mermaids asked.

“We did come from outside. Although we aren’t from the above.”

“I had a feeling you weren’t from around here. Here’s a word of advice; there’s a few rules you should follow here.”

“And what would those be?”

“First off, you gotta pluck your eyes out.”

“That’s right. We don’t see. We only hear and talk.”

“Seeing is the most dangerous thing you can do here.”

“The place looks rather beautiful, though?”

YuRia asks.

“That’s precisely why. It’s so dazzling and beautiful, it could kill you… So we gouged each other’s eyes out.”

“How many mermaids like you are here?”

“Dunno? I think I heard voices of about a hundred of them today? There’s still a bunch of surviving friends out there.”

“Survive from what, exactly?”

“From that huge monster, obviously. What else could it be?”

“Anyway, we let you hear too much of our voices. You know nothing is free in this world, right?”

“…What do you want us to yield? I wouldn’t mind compensating you for the things you told me.”

“Your voice.”

“Share your voices to us. You said this is your first time here, so we’ll

be conscientious and only take small portions from you two.”

“Mhm. You won’t be unable to speak.”

“Bleh… Detective Moses, they’re starting to freak me out?”

YuRia hid behind me. I paused for a moment to think. I’ll have to follow their rules for a while…

“You can take my voice, including this kid’s share.”

“Detective Moses!”

“YuRia, trust me.”

“Well. Fine.”

The three mermaids took turns to kiss me. Each time their lips touched mine, it felt as though something was being pulled out from my throat.

“Hey, I didn’t expect your voice to taste this good?”

“They say a voice gains a savory taste as it ages.”

“That’s so true!”

The mermaids babbled on, with much livelier and louder voices.

“Ah. Ah. Ahh.”

My voice only has half as much volume as before. It feels rather raspy as well.

“Detective Moses. Are you alright?”

YuRia worriedly asked.

“…Yeah.”

“Let me tell you one more thing. You’d better not speak too much here. Not all mermaids will take voices gently like we do. You have only so much voice to spare.”

“Then again, our existence would be pointless if we didn’t talk, no?”

“That’s why we talk nonstop and look for more voices.”

“Where can we find the giant fish you were talking about?”

“It’s where the screams are coming from. And the place that shines so brightly, it’s headache-inducing.”

“She’s got a stupidly massive voice pocket, it just never runs out no matter how much she sings?”

Once again, red words spewn from her mouth became thorns that fly somewhere. Moments later, a scream is heard.

“Thank you.”

Leaving behind the mermaids, I headed for the direction where the screams came from. They still noisily chatter, as if they want to be heard by others.

“The large monster they mentioned and the source of the screams must be Fei. It would appear that Fei’s own Distortion is attacking her.

YuRia, is it possible for your teddy bears to attack you?”

“Sure, it’s possible. There’s no way I’d make such an order, though. I control the teddy bears like they’re my hands and feet. You can slap your own cheek if you bothered to, you see what I mean?”

“…This could possibly be a form of self-harm.”

Seventeen years old. A student. Virtual school. Red water. Aquarium. Fresh water. Carp. Mermaids. Song. Voice. Thorns. Self-harm. I slowly enumerate the clues, and make possible connections. Discord with someone at school? Delicacy of a child at puberty? Desire for a beautiful voice? Urge to sing? Self-loathing? Attempted suicide? Severed relationships? There’s still much leeway for guessing. This pool of red water was created from someone’s blood. Bled from a wounded heart, most likely. Stagnant water means melancholy. The gloom is typically distorted in the form of water. Sadness full of sorrow manifests as sea water, usually with a deep blue hue. The subject often burrows deep into their own heart, settling the ocean depths. On the other hand, blood-red water is a disruptive kind. This place can be compared to an aquarium or a shallow pond. A body of stagnant water glowing in bright powder pink that is neither dark nor deep. An aquarium of depression where destructive impulse subtly rests. Repeating such thoughts in my mind, I slowly walk toward the epicenter of the sounds. Whenever the screams paused, I spoke with blind mermaids passing by. With every mermaid talking about screams, I gain more information about where the source is located. As I get closer to the sounds, more red thorns quickly fly past me. I turn around to deflect the ones flying directly toward me with my sword as I advance.

Not long after, I encountered a giant carp emitting a bright pink glow. I let out a sigh of relief. Finding the host of a Distortion in the expansive space it has created is half the battle won.

The carp radiated such a brilliant light, it was akin to a gemstone. Myriads of red thorns are lodged in its body, the colossal carp lets out painful screams; blood is gushing out from the wounds. The carp sings, crying. A dreadful Distortion created by herself. Dead mermaids litter the floor below the carp. Mermaids who still have eyes are lured by the light. When the mermaids approach the carp, long arms emerge from its mouth and pull her in for a kiss. Those hands then gouge the mermaid's eyes out. Bleeding from the emptied eye sockets, the mermaid writhes and sinks to the bottom, unable to scream. YuRia and I were watching that scene with bated breath.

All of a sudden, a red thorn grazed past my cheek and nailed itself in the carp. The white veil enfolding us pops. We're slowly doused in the red misery. Without a shroud to protect the mind, the carp's reddish light directly enters my eyes. My mind is slipping in. I tried to block the light with my palm.

"YuRia… Hand me a ribbon with the feel of enveloping something… Purple would be good…"

I can hardly speak at this point. My voice was so small and coarse.

"Here…!"

I wrapped the ribbon YuRia gave around the smoking pipe. And I exhaled a deep, violet breath. Dark smoke billowed from the pipe and surrounded the carp, holding it in place and restraining the light it

emitted. I approached the carp and removed the thorns stuck in its body, one by one. The carp shrilled each time a thorn was pulled out. The piercing shrieks invoked visions of Fei's past in my head.

"You just wanted to sing."

I pull out a thorn.

"You were always alone at home."

I pull out a thorn.

"You became friends with fellow students who enjoyed your songs."

I pull out a thorn.

"You were happy that your friends would listen to the songs you wrote."

I pull out a thorn.

"But those friends changed as time passed."

I pull out a thorn.

“Your friends only liked you for your pretty voice.”

I pull out a thorn.

“They were only interested in your voice, not the songs you made.”

I pull out a thorn.

“You began to think that your friends were jealous of you for that reason. You thought you were being hated.”

I pull out a thorn.

“You were upset. You started hating your friends.”

I pull out a thorn.

“That’s why, Fei, you pushed away your friends one-sidedly.”

I pull out a thorn.

“You became all alone.”

I pull out a thorn.

“Fei. The mermaids that are inflicting pain upon you are illusions you created.”

I pull out a thorn.

“You created a space to feel hurt and vent your anger.”

I pull out a thorn.

“Maybe the malice your friends bear is an illusion as well. You’ll never know until you have a heart to heart with them.”

I pull out a thorn.

“Doubt and anger fostered by presumptions you make on your own will only harm you.”

I continued to pluck out the thorns. My ears are bleeding. My consciousness is barely holding up. She can be categorized as a type who experienced rejection from others. They create a space for themselves, and swallow their anger inside it. Without a vent to dissipate the rage, the emotion will eat away at them.

The last remaining thorn is pulled out.

“You’ll face many hardships similar to this in the future. Please don’t hurt yourself because of that. We need to have the courage to check the true feelings of others and ourselves. The process will surely be uncomfortable and painful, just like now. Feel free to contact me whenever you feel troubled with it. We’ll ponder on the matter together.”

Bloody water poured out of Fei’s room. Fei and I were swept along by the flood and landed in the living room. Zhang Lei rushed to Fei and hugged her. That’s another case solved. There’s still a few scales left on Fei’s face, but this is a good enough outcome.

“Doc. I don’t know how to express my thanks to you.”

Zhang Lei kept bowing to me to show his gratitude.

“Pay more attention to your child. I know your job keeps you busy, but

you neglected her too much.”

“Yeah… I really should. Thanks again, doc.”

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Someone bangs the door. It’s 2 in the morning right now. I have a bad feeling about this. Zhang Lei pulled a podao[1] from his dimensional glove.

“Doc. Stay here for a moment.”

He headed to the entrance. I carried Fei on my back and returned to her room.

The front door was knocked out of the frame and flown into the house with a loud noise.

“Is a person named Moses here?”

Vespa Crabro. That’s his voice.

“…Well, who’re you?”

Zhang Lei asked back in an intimidating tone.

“Vespa Crabro, associate Fixer of N Corp, and a taboo hunter. Please spare me a moment. I have business to handle here.”

“Lemme guess, someone broke the taboo?”

“Correct.”

Click. Clack. Vespa’s shoes audibly sound on the flooring.

“Hey… Why don’tcha take your shoes off, at least?”

Click. Clack. I can hear him open each door of the house.

“You ain’t listening for shit, huh…”

Vespa was almost at the door to Fei’s room.

“The floor is soaked with water. Or is this blood?”

“Doc! Run!”

A yellow blade flashed before my eyes. Zhang Lei’s podao blocked Vespa’s sword. The sharp noise echoed through the house.

“Zhang Lei of Dou Gui Office… I’ve read a report on you in the past.”

“Well, ain’t that an honor… Doctor Moses, please take good care of my daughter.”

I gave him a nod. Vespa adjusted his glasses and scowled at me.

The sound of swords clashing against each other blared from the

house for a while. Noises of furniture breaking down. Clamor of tussles and rough shouts. I hurriedly went down the apartment, carrying Fei on my back. I couldn't afford to wait for an elevator, so we took the stairs. The noise of them fighting could still be faintly heard as I descended. We reached the ground floor.

Something dropped from above with a heavy thud, causing the concrete floor around it to cave in. I laid Fei on the ground. The dark shape rose from the ground as it came under the streetlight. Vespa's yellow clothing was smeared with blood. And the blood wasn't his. He's holding something in his hand. He then tossed it at us.

It's Zhang Lei's head.

I placed my smoking pipe in my mouth and let out a pale blue breath.

And red blood gushed out. Before I could finish breathing, my right arm fell to the ground along with the pipe. Vespa was already cleaning the blood on the yellow blade of his sword. I couldn't even see him draw it from the sheath.

"I've collected testimony from fifty people. This record is enough justification for me to execute you in District 14, Moses."

He put the yellow hwando[2] back in its sheath, and slowly approached

me.

“Any last words?”

Vespa spoke in a deep voice, adjusting his glasses.

- Translation Notes:

[1] Podao (朴刀): A Chinese edged infantry weapon similar to the guandao, it has a handle of 1~2m/4~6ft. It looks a bit like a spear with a long blade or some sort of halberd.

[2] Hwando (환도): A Korean single-edged short sword used strictly with one hand. It is curved slightly and has a length of ~70cm/24~34in.

Chapter 19: The Hunter

It’s a harpoon, not an ordinary spear.

“I’m more interested in hearing what you have to say. Do you want to take my life?”

Blood is flowing out of my severed right arm. All I can do at this point is run my mouth.

“Doctor Moses. I do not enjoy killing people. I don’t wish to stain my body with blood that I don’t need to see.”

“So… What is it that you want?”

“First and foremost, the most important task: retrieving the original footage that was recorded.”

Vespa shook his hand to check his watch for a moment, then resumed his speech.

“…Second. Moving you, Ezra, and YuRia, the three people who broke the taboo, to N Corp. Apparently, YuRia was not the only one guilty of violating the taboo.”

“You don’t immediately kill those who break the taboo? How considerate.”

“…Well, that’s how things are.”

“But, no one who’s been sent to N Corp. for infringing the taboo has ever returned, to my knowledge?”

Vespa glared at me and readjusted his glasses.

“…Doctor Moses, make no mistake. I could decapitate you right now and store your head in a preservation cube.”

“Then why aren’t you doing so?”

…Vespa has something he needs to coax out of me. Something he can get from me… Knowledge about the Distortion? It doesn’t make much sense for a taboo hunter to inquire about the Distortion. Vespa’s objective is to bring Ezra, YuRia, and I to his employer. He seems to have located me easily; then he might be aware of Ezra’s location as well. …Perhaps he already took care of her. However, he would have no need to hesitate if I were the only remaining target. Now I get it; finding Ezra and I should be easy for him. But YuRia? Even if he found Ezra and YuRia in the hotel room we booked, he’d only have an unconscious body on his hands. It would be difficult to imagine via common knowledge that her conscious mind has been transferred to this small teddy bear of all things, not a replacement body or any conceivable alternative. And Vespa is pressed for time right now. If he had enough to spare, he would’ve severed my head like he threatened to do just now and searched my brain for the relevant information. This shows that he has no time to do even that. This gives me leeway for a negotiation. He needs to know something only a conscious YuRia knows; he’s yet to find the original recordings. Only YuRia knows where they are. They’d be inside YuRia’s workshop. In that case, I have time and information as my weapon.

“Looks like I’m the only conscious person who has a lead on the whereabouts of the original footage. And you’re running short on time.”

“……”
Vespa furrowed his brow.

“It seems it’s my turn again. What happened to Ezra?”

“Fine, then. Let’s show a bit of honesty to each other. After I answer your question, you’ll answer mine in return.”

“I’ll take it. And you still haven’t given me an answer for my last question.”

“I lost Miss Ezra. She was a quick-witted one.”

I was quite relieved to hear the news. I still cannot fully trust him, however.

“It’s my turn. Doctor Moses, do you know where the original copy of the footage you’ve recorded is located?”

I know that the footage is in YuRia’s Atelier. At the same time, I don’t know how to access her workshop.

“Yes. I know where the footage is. I don’t know how to get there, though.”

Vespa raised his eyebrows.

“What did you do with YuRia’s body?”

“It’s in my car. And I haven’t laid a finger on it. I answered your

question, so let me ask mine. Can you figure out how to access the location where the footage is?”

I can figure it out; I can simply ask YuRia about it. Even if I had no way of knowing, this is a question I am obligated to answer with a “Yes”. If I said otherwise, my usefulness would expire to him. Vespa believes what I’m saying. This question is one asked by someone expecting to hear a truthful statement for every question. He’s more honest than he seems. I’ve gained all the information I need from him. Vespa is likely to be telling the truth; that would mean Ezra is alive. YuRia’s body is fine as well. All I can do next is have faith in Ezra.

“I can. What happens to us once we follow you to N Corp?”

“…I’m afraid I don’t know that. All I do is hunt down those who violate the taboo and send them to N Corp.”

Vespa looked at his watch again.

“Alright. I believe we can now make a deal. As you have pointed out, I have little time to spare. I will only take you along with the original footage, Doctor Moses. I will forfeit the hunt for Ezra and YuRia as of now. I would advise against attempting to bargain for more, for your information.”

“Fine. YuRia, open the atelier for him.”

YuRia squirmed out of my coat’s pocket. Vespa quietly stares at us, showing no reaction to the moving teddy bear.

“Detective Moses…”

“I told you, you should trust me.”

“…Understood. A door is needed to get to my atelier. We could use ones in Mister Zhang’s house.”

“Can you make some time to go back up the apartment?”

“If we must, we’ll go up as you ask. Your arm… and this smoking pipe will be in my possession. You’ll have to come with me anyway.”

After I nodded, Vespa came to my side. He took out a stasis preservation cube from his inside coat pocket and stored my right arm in it. Putting the cube back, Vespa covered my shoulder with a dressing. He then put Fei on his shoulder, who was still lying on the ground unconscious. He bent his knees to lower his position and stretched an arm at us. YuRia and I watched Vespa’s bizarre series of movements in silence.

“We have no time to take an elevator. Come over here.”

“Do we really have to do this?”

“Doctor Moses, I cannot waste a second.”

…Disgusting. Vespa leapt to the seventeenth floor of the apartment with Fei and I in his embrace. He has tremendous muscular strength. He must have gained it through a multitude of augmentation procedures, and I assume he partakes in ceaseless physical training as well. We were back at Zhang Lei’s house in an instant. All the furniture in the house is now severely damaged or broken. Blade cuts were vividly showing on the walls. I could guess how fierce the battle was despite its length.

“I merely acted in self-defense while executing my duty. I hope you don’t have any hard feelings towards me for killing an acquaintance of

yours, Doctor Moses."

He's a dangerous kind. He switches his attitude in an instant and entices people into bringing their guard down with honeyed words, saying that he didn't do it because he wanted to. This man could've easily neutralized Zhang Lei without killing him. In that sense, Vespa is a pro when it comes to hunting people. He knows when to apply psychological pressure on his targets and when to loosen them up. Every action of his is calculated. Vespa gently put Fei and I on the floor.

"YuRia, open the workshop."

YuRia climbed out of my pocket and touched one of the closed doors. The door vibrated briefly.

"Done."

"I want you to enter first."

Vespa said, adjusting his glasses. It had to be an unfamiliar sight for him, but he doesn't appear fazed at all. I picked up YuRia, who was standing in front of the door, and placed her on my shoulder. I opened the door to the now familiar staircase to YuRia's Atelier. I slowly walked down the stairs. Vespa follows us from behind, keeping a distance. After coming down the stairs, we're walking along the corridor leading to the hall. This is where the real battle starts.

"YuRia, the bears."

Right as I whispered the words to YuRia, I rolled forward. All the bears in YuRia's Atelier rushed out at once. Teddy bears armed with blades on their paws jumped at Vespa. There was a flash of yellow light. The

heads of the bears dropped to the ground before they could even reach him. A large bear with an axe descends from the ceiling, aiming for Vespa. The bear is split in half before touching the ground. While Vespa's sword was busy cutting apart the bears, I desperately ran toward the exit. Numerous bears gang up on Vespa. Every single one of them is sliced up before they can touch him. Keeping Vespa occupied is good enough work for us, however.

"YuRia, you can't pump out an unlimited amount of bears, can you?"

"Of course I can't. I'm about to faint from dizziness. I'm squeezing my brain right now."

YuRia struggled to speak, clinging to my shoulder.

"Doctor Moses. I am disappointed."

Vespa's quiet mutter reached my ear. I arrived at the stairs leading up to the outside. And I told Vespa.

"You'll find the footage you're looking for at the end of that corridor. You'd best settle for retrieving the footage."

Vespa is surrounded by a legion of teddy bears. It's physically improbable that he'll come for us immediately in that state. I just need to take a few more steps up the stairs.

"…I intend to keep my word. I am taking both you and the footage."

Light flashed for a split second. I fell down on my face with a groan. A spear penetrated my left thigh and nailed itself to the floor. This is a

tool for hunting humans. It's a harpoon, not an ordinary spear. Damn it, the hornet was embroidered on his clothes for a reason. Vespa unhurriedly approaches me, slicing up the bears around him. I tried to pull the harpoon out of my thigh, but it wouldn't budge. I don't have the strength to remove this. YuRia tries to help me but to no avail. Fallen on the stairway, I lifted my head. All I had to do was climb up those stairs. Vespa was now right behind me. The exit seems so far and faint now.

"I suppose taking your head was a better idea, after all."

Vespa adjusted his glasses.

"…This will not happen again."

…So this is how it ends.

"Hectopascal kick!!! Ten times the acceleration!!!"

Ezra landed her foot on Vespa's chest with incredible force. Vespa was flung far away at a remarkable speed.

“Detective!!! Are you okay?!”

Ezra was also covered in injuries.

“…Just look at me and tell me if this looks okay.”

“Ezra seonbae!”

“Junior!!!”

YuRia hopped excitedly. Ezra responded with a wide smile. She must have been worried about YuRia because she couldn’t protect her body from Vespa. But it’s still too early to be relieved. Most foes would’ve been reduced to pieces of flesh and bone the moment they came in contact with Ezra’s flying kick coming down from the height of a long stairway at full force. However, Vespa was only knocked away by its impact. That monster of a man.

“Ezra. Please get rid of this thing stuck in my thigh.”

“Kay! Detective… Hold still for a bit!”

I grit my teeth. The harpoon was removed from the ground once Ezra gave it some force.

“Detective! Can you get up on your own?”

Ezra has no time to help me up. She has to face Vespa, who will come back for us in no time.

“Seonbae. I’ll help detective up with my bears.”

“Okay! I’ll leave it to you, junior!”

Small teddy bears appeared and lifted me. They're probably manifested from the last of YuRia's mental strength that she could squeeze out. The bears carry us and speedily climb up the staircase.

"Ezra! Follow us right away!"

With a blast of sound, a yellow light sparkles from the end of the corridor and dashes toward us. In the fraction of a second, Ezra caught the yellow blade between her palms with a clapping motion.

"…Excellent."

Vespa remarked, shaking his rumpled hair with his vacant right hand.

"Detective! You should go first!"

Ezra shouted.

"Ezra! Get up here as soon as you see a chance!"

I shouted back.

"Hehe… Don't think I can do that! Sorry."

Ezra answered.

Chapter 20: A Bloody Struggle

Nevertheless, Ezra moves forward.

“…Cuz, I think I might win this if things go well!”

Clap!

The edge of the sword in Vespa’s left hand is facing toward Ezra, and she’s desperately keeping the blade from getting closer to her. Vespa strikes Ezra’s ribs with his unoccupied right hand. PUM. A noise echoes. The blow sends Ezra flying to the wall; she then rebounds to deliver a kick to Vespa’s head. Vespa’s glasses are knocked off of his face. He stumbled for a moment, but he soon regained balance.

“Tch...”

Ezra wipes the blood on her mouth.

“You’re talented in combat.”

A yellow light flashed.

“But you do not have the talent of killing people.”

Blood spilled from Ezra’s chest. She took out the Nester Workshop hammer and swung it downward, only to land on thin air. Dammit. If only I had my smoking pipe, I could’ve leveraged the situation in her favor somehow. I was halfway up the stairs. There’s absolutely nothing I can do other than helplessly watch Ezra.

“Seonbae! Remember what we talked about the other day!”

YuRia shouted urgently.

“…I know, junior!!!”

Come to think of it, the mask that always used to cover Ezra’s face wasn’t there this time. A yellow light flashed once again. The flashing light left a trail across Ezra’s waist.

Kreeeeeeeeee!

Sparks flew up with an ear-splitting screech of metal. Ezra’s left waist is padded with an object akin to a sheet of steel.

“Augmented armor, is it… I must wonder why you haven’t used it until now.”

“Huff… This is my first time using it, so!”

“……”

Flashes of yellow light sparkle from Vespa's left arm. A piece of armor blooms wherever a yellow light strikes. The blade leaves yellow trails as it slices through the armor, but it fails to leave a deep cut. Ezra shrugs off Vespa's attacks and swiftly closes in on him. That's my Ezra. Ezra's Psychoment is thoroughly protecting her. She drills a fist into Vespa's chest without hesitation. The sheer force of the punch produced a sound wave that resounded through the workshop. Vespa flinched with a cough. Ezra gives him no rest from the flurry of her fists. Vespa is steadily being pushed into the corner, coughing up blood. This battle is under Ezra's control now. She gives her opponent no room to brandish their sword; Ezra knows well how to fight someone armed with a bladed weapon. But Vespa is just as persistent, he won't fall down or let go of his blade. Even though his face is already covered in blood, he won't lose his balance. Despite seeing Ezra completely dominate the fight, I can't be at ease.

"…I must reassess you."

Vespa mutters something. Ezra ignores his mumbling and continues to throw punches and kicks at him. Groin. Left chest. Laryngeal prominence. Right waist. Left calf. Solar plexus. Left cheek. Solar plexus. Groin. Rib. Left thigh. Groin again. Left waist. Ezra's fists strike every known weakness of the human body that could be fatal. Vespa groans. But he does not collapse.

YuRia and I reached the top of the stairs and escaped the atelier. Outside of the door, we watched Ezra's fight with bated breath.

Ziiiiin. A sharp, high-pitched sound was heard. Vespa is holding a harpoon in his right hand. That harpoon was lying on the floor behind Ezra mere moments ago. And there was a hole in the armor covering Ezra's left shoulder. Blood leaks from the injured shoulder, yet Ezra does not step back. She continues to pummel Vespa with her right hand. Vespa held the harpoon short and stabbed it into Ezra. Ezra took quick steps to dodge to the side, but she couldn't outspeed the thrust. The harpoon penetrated deep into Ezra's side. Nevertheless, Ezra moves forward. And she wrapped her right arm around Vespa's. Cacrick. This is the sound of bones breaking. Ezra broke Vespa's arm, and snapped it. Clink. The harpoon tumbles to the floor. However, Vespa's eyes have not gone lifeless. He stares into Ezra without blinking even once. Those eyes are dangerous. …Ezra cannot finish this fight. She will die if this goes on.

The fight needs to end right this instant.

"Ezra! Get up here now!!!"

I shouted at Ezra from the top of my lungs. She instantly backed off, kicking Vespa in the chest.

"Yes! Detective!!!"

Ezra rapidly sprints up the stairs.

Vespa has his gaze fixed on her.

“YuRia! Seal the workshop!” I yelled, ready to shut the door.

The harpoon is lifted in front of his eyes.

Ezra climbed the staircase in a matter of seconds. She’s only one step away.

A yellow light flashed before my eyes. It can’t be anything other than his harpoon, coming at full speed towards Ezra, and towards me.

Believing in Ezra, I slammed the door shut with all my strength.

Kwiiiiiiiing! The vibration sent a tremor through the building for a while.

I am fortunately alive.

The harpoon couldn’t break through the atelier’s door.

And Ezra…

“Detective! What’ll we do with your arm and leg! Doesn’t it hurt bad?!!”

She was checking on me first, even when she was badly injured herself.

We all survived the hunter.

I heaved a sigh.

Looking around the living room, I was greeted by the Fixers of Dou Gui Office who were still alive.

And Fei was at the center of them.

…There’s many pieces that need picking up here.

Chapter 21: Roadtrip

“Yeah, let’s help ourselves to a fair bit when we get there.”

It seems five Fixers out of the seventeen of Dou Gui Office have survived. They’re just as badly wounded as we are. Some have lost their arms, and most are drenched in blood. It’s evident that Vespa’s end goal wasn’t senseless murder. He exerted the precise amount of violence that was needed to carry out his mission. He most likely withdrew from the hotel as soon as he secured YuRia’s body.

“…My father has passed away.”

Fei said.

“I suppose you’re responsible for it, and it’s also thanks to you that I could leave that room.”

“…Sorry about that.”

"…It was my father’s choice to work in such a perilous business.”

“…True, our work is a risky one. Who is the current representative of Dou Gui Office? I’d like to settle up the charge for this request.”

“As per the tradition of Dou Gui Office, Miss Fei here will be inheriting the position as representative of the Office.”

One of the Fixers spoke. A hereditary Office… A combat Office with a hereditary system. This Office values loyalty above all else, as I suspected. Moreover, the new leader is a student who hasn't reached adulthood yet. It's unfortunate, but it's as clear as day that this Office will disband sooner or later.

"Well then, Fei of Dou Gui Office. Let me ask this straight. Are you going to hold us responsible for this?"

The room fell quiet. My contract with Zhang Lei was a verbal one. There's no document to prove that Zhang Lei died protecting us as part of his work. The worst case scenario would be her escalating the situation into a violent conflict as payback. We'd have to fight tooth and nail against people with equally tattered bodies. Our fate is in the hands of this young representative.

"Everyone. Let's take time to heal up before we continue the conversation. I have a lot I'd like to hear from you."

Fei suggested with a calm voice. She's a wise child.

Ezra broke into Vespa's car and extracted YuRia's body. Her body was untouched just as Vespa said. We returned to our Office with it. Vespa was surprisingly gentle about combing through our vacant home, it seems. Our Office looked nearly identical to how it was when we left. Ezra and I took an HP tablet and went to sleep. There was much we wanted to discuss, but we were on the verge of collapse, physically and mentally. We decided to save talk for the day after.

Dou Gui Office: Lunchtime. The three of us sat on a sofa. Fei modestly sits on the leather sofa where her father used to frequent.

“President Fei. May I explain our situation and stance first?”

“Yes. Go ahead.”

“I made a deal with Zhang Lei, the previous representative of Dou Gui Office. The contract was to hire all Fixers of Dou Gui Office for two weeks. I needed their help because we broke the taboo of District 14 and a taboo hunter began pursuing us. I agreed to pay as much as they demanded according to the rules of the Office. However, we only vaguely discussed the payment and never decided on an exact sum. And I didn’t disclose the identity of my pursuer to them. If I told them I was being chased by a taboo hunter… most would refuse to take the request. So Zhang Lei gave me another condition: To solve the strange happening taking place in his house. I had informed him that I run an Office that solves mysteries and unsolved cases, which likely led him to bring it up. And the peculiar occurrence in his house was related to you, President Fei. I followed Zhang Lei to his house, and saved you in my own way, thus fulfilling one of the conditions of our contract. Shortly after I solved the case, the taboo hunter came to the house to capture me, and Zhang Lei died in the process of defending me as part of the contract. This is the way things happened.”

“You’re telling the story in such a dry tone.”

“I also risked my life to save yours, mind you. Even though there’s no physical proof, I can say with certainty that I made a deal with him that involves lives and money.”

“I know. It’s not that I distrust you. I just hoped to hear you express your condolences to my father.”

“…Yes. I personally feel quite grateful to Zhang Lei as well. Even after knowing that his opponent was a taboo hunter, he didn’t hesitate to brandish his weapon against him in order to protect me. Although, it would be fairer to say that he did it for your sake, Fei. And I heard from Ezra that she managed to safely escape from the hotel thanks to the Fixers of your Office. My appreciation and condolences to Zhang Lei and all the other Fixers of the Office who passed away knows no bounds.”

Ezra slowly nodded next to me.

“Yeah. Your words hopefully comforted my father’s spirit a little.”

Fei looked down for a short moment.

“The request our Office has taken isn’t over yet. We will protect the people of Moses’ Office for the remaining 13 days.”

“Yes, boss!”

The Fixers of Dou Gui Office answered in unison. I’m quite touched by her kind heart, but I must say it feels like a child playing boss more than anything. The Office has already lost most of its strength. A cool-headed representative should nullify a baseless request like this and focus on reorganization.

“I know that my decision may seem silly to adults. You’re probably thinking that it won’t help us in the long run. But here’s something my father once told me: ‘Our Office is bound together with loyalty.’ So I’d like to repay you for staking your life to rescue me. …Besides, you promised to ponder on my troubles together, and you’ll have to be alive for that, right?”

She got me there. This child may have a faint heart, but she is a person of will.

“Crane. Please contact our sister Offices. Tell them that Dou Gui Office is requesting help.”

A Fixer standing next to Fei nods.

“Thank you, President Fei. Our Office is deeply indebted to you.”

I stood up and formally showed my gratitude.

“My father taught me what to do in case this day arrived. From now on… I’ll have to learn from the people here.”

Fei stared into space for a short while, immersed in thought.

“Let’s settle up the request fee now. I’ll set the amount based on the customs of Dou Gui Office.”

She’s meticulous in her business dealings, at least.

“Ezra, I’ll leave this to you.”

I came up to the rooftop. I fished out a cigarette from a pack with my left hand and held it in my mouth. I have to light it up as well, what a nuisance… Blowing out smoke, I thought about what lie ahead of us.

“Detective Moses. What will you do about your smoking pipe?”

“That’s what I’d like to ask. What will you do about your workshop?”

“My atelier will be out of commission for a while. I’ve wrung out all my brain power, so I won’t be able to reopen the atelier anytime soon, and conjuring up bears to work for me is another mental chore.”

“Huff… Both you and I have become useless. Actually, no. At least I can still see the Distortion.”

“…I’ll work like a dog once my atelier is back in business.”

YuRia spoke in a tiny voice.

“Detective! Detective! I got a huuuge discount! Hehe…”

Ezra came running with a delighted look. Looks like the negotiation was a success. I pulled another cigarette out of the pack. Ezra deftly lights the cigarette in my mouth.

“Detective! Where will we get a new arm for you? Oh… and what about the smoking pipe?!”

“You’ve come at the right time, we were talking about it just now. I’ll have to get a new arm before we head to District 11. Ezra, may I leave you to choose the right model of prosthetic for me?”

“Yeah! You bet! I’ll find one that suits you real nicely, detective!”

I’m taking it off for my real arm once I get it back from the pesky bee. The last time I saw my right arm, he stored it in a stasis preservation cube.

“Maybe that stupid hornet will starve to death if we keep him trapped in my atelier for long enough?”

“Waiting it out is one way, sure. But a Fixer at Vespa’s level can take procedures that allow them to last long without food or water. We don’t know what kind of augments Vespa has, which means we don’t know when or if he’ll actually die of starvation. Tell me, how will Vespa rampaging in your workshop affect you?”

“It’ll take some time to restore the atelier, first and foremost… And by some time, I mean a considerable amount of it… I’ll be dead weight for a good while…”

“At least it’s a relief to know that your body and mind will be alright. I’ll use my brain to work out how we’ll deal with Vespa, so you can let yours rest. And Ezra, how did you manage to manifest your Psychoment?”

Ezra is wearing her mask now. Her distortion has become visible again. I bit a new cigarette in my mouth. I miss my pipe.

“Ehehe… I consulted with my junior here about it, actually! I was thinking maybe I could get stronger if I learned to use Psychoment! So she taught me the knack of it!”

“YuRia, I don’t believe a knack alone is sufficient to manifest the Psychoment?”

“I gave her a pendant in addition to that. Another prototype of mine. I watched the footage of Ezra seonbae fighting the skeleton titan in Tae-young Produce Co. over and over again, and carved a pendant that I thought would be compatible with her. The pendant I made is a catalyst for manifesting Psychoment. It also helps shape the Psychoment according to the carved mental image.”

“That will be quite useful in the future.”

“Carving one is a time-consuming process that I need my atelier to even begin, though…”

“I could become stronger thanks to you, junior!”

Both of our problems come down to Vespa being trapped inside the atelier. I need my smoking pipe back, and YuRia needs her workshop back to fully realize her capabilities. Nothing has really changed. I need to meet up with Han Hee-joon in District 11 and dump this beehive on him.

“What should we do with your body, YuRia?”

“Oh! About that, when I explained her situation to Fei, she said she’ll take care of the body until we get back!”

She’s being too nice to us. Perhaps she wishes to ensure that her father’s life was not lost in vain by providing safety and comfort to the people he died to protect. In any case, I’m in no position to refuse the hospitality. I took the cigarette out of my mouth and ground it into the ashtray. It’s time to start preparing for the trip.

A funeral for Zhang Lei and his deceased subordinates was held for three days. The funeral was conducted according to the traditions of the east, Zhang’s region of origin. Fei remained in the funeral parlor from start to finish of the ceremony. Looking at the portrait of Zhang Lei smiling at the camera, I couldn’t help but be reminded of a photographer I met some time ago.

I had to accompany Ezra on her shopping tour to workshops for some time. The Fixers of Dou Gui Office and its sister Offices escorted us throughout the leave, as though we were noblewomen. In fact, the escort didn't stop when we were back inside. They stood guard vigilantly around our Office and made sure that no intruder could dare approach or harm us. I spent the rest of my time talking with Fei about the Distortion. About what happened to her, and how she should live out her life hereafter… The time passed steadily.

30 minutes until the WARP train departs. I puffed my last cigarette in the smoking lounge. WARP trains… They always reach their destination in the blink of an eye. Ezra waves at me from the platform, carrying her dimensional bag over her shoulder. She must be thrilled about this. I put YuRia in my coat pocket. I made sure to tell her to act like a doll for a good while. Fei and the Fixers of Dou Gui Office came over to see us off.

Ezra and I sat in our seats on the train.

"We're finally leaving."

We've faced so many vicissitudes up until this departure. Alas…

"Ehehe. A trip, I'm so excited for it!"

"Ezra, what awaits us there might be even more intense than the things we've gone through recently."

"And food, too! I've only seen the food of the southern districts in

pictures, so I've always wanted to try it myself!"

"Yeah, let's help ourselves to a fair bit when we get there."

"Oh yeah!"

I closed my eyes.

And when I opened my eyes, we were already at our destination.

The WARP station in District 11, where the Nest of K Corp. is located.

Where Han Hee-joon is.

And where that person is.

Chapter 22: Part 1's Epilogue / Part 2's Prologue

It's to face the past; I had to be confronted with it someday…

"Greetings, Doctor Moses. You've come at last."

A familiar pair of arrogant eyeballs await me right outside the WARP terminal. The way he speaks infuriates me even more. 'At last,' he says, like I had any choice. I was caught in the shrewd trap he set up. Those words could very well mean 'as I expected'.

"Didn't you tell us to come to your workroom at the Association?"

"I came here to pick you up instead, because we have no time to lose. …What happened to your right arm?"

It's appalling to see him assume an air of concern.

"Ezra, deal with whatever he has to say for me. I'll be in the smoking lounge for a bit."

"Got it, detective!"

"…Moses? Is that really you, Moses?!"

This voice… That son of a bitch Han Hee-joon screwed me over in

more ways than one. Perhaps the real meaning of his ‘at last’ was ‘in spite of everything’.

“…Detective!”

Ezra quickly stands between me and the unwelcome guest.

“Ezra’s here, too! I missed you two so much.”

Her despicable voice. Her sly eyes. And her pitying gaze toward us.

“Dias… Please just leave, we can’t handle this, not today…”

Ezra pleads in a quavering voice.

“Moses, dear! I forgot all about what happened that day! So can’t we go back to how we used to be in the good old days, pretty please?”

That person hasn’t changed one bit since that day. From her appearance to her demeanor.

“Right, Hee-joon? It’s all in the past, isn’t it?”

Han Hee-joon stays silent. That day, I led hundreds of people to death. I wanted to save them from Dias’ arms. But I could not.

“Dias… What shady bullshit were you plotting with Tae-young Produce Co. in District 14?”

Holding in my feelings, I quietly asked.

“Ah! That thing?! Actually…”

“Lady Dias. I’m afraid we’ll have to take a rain check on that. Doctor Moses has to take care of an urgent matter for the Association right now.”

Han Hee-joon intervened with a laugh.

“…Aw, really? That’s too bad… Do invite these two to my home later, okay?”

“Understood. I’ll arrange it as soon as the doctor finishes her mission.”

We sat in the backseat of Han Hee-joon’s vehicle. None of us are willing to speak first. I gaze out the window. The reason I’ve come to District 11… It’s not to make money, keep my name in the Association, or to solve Distortions. It’s to face the past; I had to be confronted with it someday…

“As I explained two months ago, Seven Association wants the Distortion in its whole, doctor. …Are you two listening to me?”

“Mhm! At least I am, Hee-joon seonbae!”

Ezra answers in my stead.

“We’re heading to a rural village. Our Association has been keeping an eye on the place for the last two months. And the time is ripe to harvest that fruit.”

“…Are you saying the town has been ravaged by the Distortion already?”

I opened my mouth.

“No, it’s a peaceful place. But it is distorted. Even I could tell, and I’m not capable of seeing the Distortion.”

The car stopped in front of a street.

“We’ve arrived. You can get out now.”

Ezra and I stepped out of the back. Han Hee-joon lowered the driver’s side window.

“Walk down this street for around fifteen minutes, and you’ll find a small village.”

“And what exactly am I supposed to do there? I haven’t received any documentation detailing the mission?”

I took a pack of cigarettes out of the inner pocket of my coat, and held a cigarette in my mouth. Ezra lights it up.

“…Doctor Moses. Your smoking pipe?”

Surprised, Han Hee-joon asked.

“…It’s a long story. So, care to remind me what we should do here?”

“…You’ll see once you enter the village. Your work is to investigate the place and draw a cogent conclusion from it. Afterwards, report what happened in the village to the Association.”

I swung my hand at Han Hee-joon as a gesture that he’s told me enough and as such can sod off now.

“…Doctor Moses. This will be a wretched job.”

I puffed smoke into the air. Han Hee-joon raises the window back up.

"…Please survive.”

He just won’t stop being an ominous sod. Leaving us behind, he drove soddily away.

“Ezra! YuRia! Get ready.”

“Yes! Detective!”

Ezra tightened the grip on her dimensional bag.

“That was too cramped.”

YuRia climbed out of my pocket and assumed my shoulder.

We walked along the narrow street and headed into the village.

DIAS

USERMAAT SETEPENRE

Chapter 23: Quercus Village

Ah, right now is the season for the harvest festival of our town.

It's 10 in the morning. The sun beams down on the somber alley. We walked up the winding street. There are many unknown paths like this in the Backstreets; uncharted streets not shown on any map. Walking into an unfamiliar street poses a great risk. As is the case with the Nests, each area of the Backstreets has its own culture. Unexpected savagery could be waiting around the corner.

Walking down the street for around fifteen minutes as Han Hee-joon instructed, I could see a sign that read 'Quercus Village'. He didn't bother to give me a detailed description of this town. What are the cultural characteristics of the village, are there any taboos, anything… Will it be okay for us to readily set foot in this village? It probably will be. As much of a shady creep as Han is, he's not the type of person to lead us into death in such a primeval way. I took some time to smoke at the entrance before entering the village.

"Detective! Detective! Do you want me to prepare for combat just in case?"

Ezra asked, and I shook my head.

"Because we have no idea what this place is like, we shouldn't let ourselves look nervous. Let's act natural and pretend that we're

travelers.”

“Seonbae would be perfect as a food tourist exploring local eateries.”

YuRia added. I smiled a little. That certainly does fit Ezra well.

“That doesn’t sound bad. We’ll disguise ourselves as traveling writers who tour small restaurants hidden in the alleys and street corners around the City. My work is to cover the venues and evaluate the quality of their food. As for you, Ezra, you can be my traveling partner and bodyguard. A person who goes around corners of the Backstreets would need someone to escort them, which justifies your use of force.”

“Gosh… I love that idea! I wanna be a bodyguard that also judges food!”

“Do as you wish. And YuRia, don’t say a word outside of emergencies, and keep your voice low when you do have to talk. It’d be a hassle to explain how a teddy bear can move and speak to the townsfolk.”

“Duly noted.”

I ashed my cigarette in the portable ashtray.

“Alright… Time to head in.”

When I entered the town, I couldn’t believe my eyes. It’s a quiet and cozy place. And lush flowers and grass line the streets. I see houses and buildings in vibrant colors that don’t match the grey tone of the City. Brick houses that are about 2 to 3 stories tall. Wooden roof. This beauty and peace is what you’d expect in a Nest somewhere. How

could a town outside of the Nest be so calm and pleasing? I know that there are many alleyways known to only few, but I have never visited a place in the Backstreets that is as snug and tranquil as this fairy-tale town. Perhaps it's my knowledge that is shallow. Maybe there are more places like this out there.

"…Wow!"

Ezra seems to be struck with amazement as well. I looked around to see if there was any villager I can talk to. Not a single person outside. Perhaps it's obvious. This is a weekday. The townspeople likely have jobs to do and money to earn. Even then, this is eerily quiet. Looks like I'll have to poke around the buildings in the town. A restaurant should be an ideal starter.

"Ezra, look for eateries nearby."

"…Gasp! Will do!!"

Ezra takes the lead with brisk steps. She seems quite excited. I lazily follow her along. This town appears to have about fifty households. The population would be around 80 people. A diner, cafe, or pub. There had to be at least one of those venues.

"Detective! Detective! Over here, I found one!"

Ezra waves her hand at me. Looks like she found something. I see a door with a sign that reads 'De Mar Teahouse'. Hearing the clanging of chimes, Ezra and I entered the café. It's a small venue with four tables and a floor space of 15 pyeong.

"…Oh? We-Welcome to the shop!"

The voice did not seem to expect a guest.

“Is this place open right now?”

I asked.

“Yes, yes. Of course~”

“I presume you don’t often get customers at this hour?”

“Ahaha, you see, our town is in a rather remote spot, so I rarely had any visitors outside of the townspeople here.”

Oh dear. They are a little wary of us. I suppose this is a closed village as I suspected.

“I must say, I was surprised as well. I never thought I would stumble upon such a beautiful town in an unexpected place like this. Ah, pardon my manners, let me introduce myself. I’m Momo, a traveling gourmet who seeks out unknown restaurants in obscure locations. And this is my partner…”

“I’m Miss Momo’s partner in travel! Name’s Ezez!”

That’s a false name just as elaborate as mine.

“You were travelers, I see! Ahaha, our town certainly is pretty, but I’m afraid it’s not famous for its food.”

“It’s fine. Finding new restaurants on the streets I’m visiting for the first time is a genuine pleasure to me on its own worth.”

“I’m Dewey, owner of De Mar Teahouse. Oh, let me bring you the

menu."

We chose a table and took a seat. It's a charming little teahouse. I can feel the warmth of a wooden construction. The afternoon sunlight shined through the windows. A sense of serenity and relaxation which is a rarity in the City. It's like a luxury that only those in affluent areas can have a taste of.

"Here's our menu. Take your time, and give me an order when you've made up your mind."

"Whoa! It's only just that a true alley-restaurant connoisseur should try out every dish on the menu, right, Miss Momo?!"

Ezra, you glutton…

"Hahaha, slow down, Miss Ezez. Did you forget that our rule is to only try three dishes the chef recommends?"

I lightly pinched Ezra's hand. She frowned a little in response. Dewey looks at us with a smile, seemingly amused by our little banter.

"Oh hey! Isn't that doll… Kkomi the Red Bear?! It's a teddy bear character that was famous for a while before it got discontinued!"

Kko…what? I was confused by the question that came completely out of the left field.

"…What's a Kkomi?"

Ezra naively asks. You idiot… We're supposed to go with the flow, not ask questions about what is common knowledge to them right away. This will only make us look more suspicious.

“Oh, right, you said you’re travelers. I guess you come from a pretty far away place. The character was still pretty popular in its time, though…”

YuRia slightly trembles on my shoulder. She must have a thing or two to say about that.

“Haha, this was a gift from an acquaintance of mine, actually. I understand that you’re a big fan of cute characters like this, Miss Ezez, didn’t you know about this one?”

I gave Ezra a subtle signal.

“Oh, err… Kkumi! Kkumi the Red Bear! Yup, I do. It’d be a crime for me to not know Kkumi.”

“It’s Kkomi…”

An awkward pause ensues. Honesty is the only way out of this.

“Hahaha… We’re from the northern side of the City, so we don’t know much about what goes on down here in the south.”

“The north?! You’ve come from so far away! I’ve never left District 11 in my life, let alone gone anywhere near the northern areas.”

“Well, you could say the same for most people in the City.”

I gave a serviceable response. It’s time to change the topic.

“Well then, Dewey. I’d like to order three dishes of your suggestion.”

“Okay, please wait warmly.”

Dewey went into the kitchen. I could hear the sounds of tableware rattling. I looked out the window. There's still no one out on the town streets.

"Is this town always so quiet?"

I talked to the kitchen with a somewhat loud voice.

"Ah, right now is the season for the harvest festival of our town. People who've got time to spare are preparing the ceremony at the town hall."

A period of celebration… A closed village and unique customs. Not a good combination. Things like this usually follow a formula. And the formula usually ends with creepy cannibalism ceremonies or cultic carnage parties. However, if this was one of those predictable cases, Section 2 of the Seven wouldn't have bothered to entrust me with solving it. I'll take a straightforward approach.

"A harvest festival? Could we join that festival, if you don't mind?"

Depending on the villager's reaction, this can be categorized into one of the two types: rejecting outsiders, or actively inviting them to participate. In the case of the latter, there's a high probability that the outsider ends up being the sacrificial lamb. This one being a welcoming kind would be much more convenient for us to resolve this mission. It's simply too much of a hassle to try and sneak into a festival that excludes outsiders.

"Of course! A festival becomes merrier with more people enjoying it."

Dewey came out of the kitchen with food for us. Black tea, pancakes, and omelettes. Looks plain. Ezra's eyes sparkled.

“Well then, enjoy your food. I’ll go ask everyone in the town hall.”

“Thank you.”

Smiling, Dewey left the restaurant.

“Ezra, what do you think?”

“It was quite orthodox.”

“You think so, too.”

“Yep. A fairly sweet vanilla flavored pancake, a moderately soft omelette, and a moderately fragrant cup of black tea. All standard.”

Sigh… I placed my hand on my forehead. I guess I should just leave her to fill her stomach for now. I ran my eyes over the teashop again. I still don’t see any apparent anomalies. This is nothing more than a cozy teahouse. Some time has passed. Door chimes rang as Dewey returned to the teashop.

“Miss Momo, Miss Ezez. The townspeople all gladly agreed to let you participate. Shall we head to the town hall if you’re done eating?”

Quite the welcoming kind. I have no reason to refuse it. The faster this job is dealt with, the better.

“Will do. Miss Ezez, how did you enjoy the meal?”

“It was overwhelmingly satisfying, Miss Momo.”

We left the restaurant to follow Dewey. The time is just past 1 PM. This village is a fascinating sight to behold. If I ever earn the right to retire and live to an old age, perhaps this is where I'd choose to spend the rest of my life. While I was immersed in such thoughts, we arrived at the town hall. This appears to be the widest building in town.

"Everyone! Here are Miss Momo and Miss Ezez, the visitors I told you about earlier."

Ezra and I nodded a greeting. There are about 40 people inside the building. Each of them bids us a welcome. …This is not good. I looked at Ezra, and back at the townsfolk. …Now I understand why Han Hee-joon gave me this job.

"A pleasure to meet you. I am Domis, head of this village. I heard from Dewey that you two are travelers."

"Yes. We're travelers who search for restaurants around the corners of the streets. I'm Momo, and this is Ezez."

"Hello!"

Ezra cheerfully greets them.

"Thank you for allowing strangers like us to join the festival of your village."

"Haha, that's the charm of traveling, isn't it. Besides, festivals are more fun when there are other people to celebrate together."

The townspeople are making effigies out of tree branches.

“We’d like to help you out with the preparation.”

“No, no. You’ve come from a far place, you deserve some rest.”

“I believe participating in all stages of a festival starting with its preparation is the way to truly enjoy it as you mentioned.”

Domis laughed.

“You raise a good point. Then I’ll tell the people here that you two are helping out as well.”

We helped the townsfolk with preparing the festival for a while. I carefully watched them while we worked. What I see confirms that the suspicion I have is not just my imagination.

“Is there a place where I can smoke in this village?”

I asked a villager standing next to me.

“Oh, you’re free to smoke outside as long as there’s no one around. Just make sure not to throw the cigarette butt on the ground.”

“Sure thing.”

I stepped out of the town hall. The clock struck four. There’s still not a single person out in the town streets I can see. I went to a remote place and pulled out a cigarette. And I placed a hand to my forehead.

“Detective Moses, did you figure out anything?”

YuRia whispers.

I puffed out smoke.

“Yes… I cannot see the Distortion from any of the townspeople here.”

Chapter 24: The Emotions of Life

The festival is about to begin.

“You can’t see their Distortions? But, that has to mean all the villagers have Psychoment according to our theory so far…”

“We’ll see soon enough.”

I stared at the cigarette smoke I had just puffed out. If I had my smoking pipe, I could have used the white breath to grasp the truth of this festival and the situation a bit more easily. The pipe… And Vespa. It’s like thinking about overdue homework you procrastinated on the whole night. I walked back to the town hall.

“Miss Momo~!”

Ezra waves her hand at me as if she were waiting for me to come back. Dewey is next to her.

“What’s the business, Miss Ezez?”

“You see, Miss Momo. It’s almost time for dinner, so they’re asking us to aid them with preparing food for the festival. They thought epicures like us would love to see the process firsthand.”

Oh dear… I’m not cut out for cooking.

“Oh! But Miss Momo is a terrible cook, what do we do?!”

…How I wish I could smack her upside the head.

“Ahaha, I’ll help you out by your side, so don’t be anxious.”

Dewey kindly spoke.

“And my wife is here to help as well.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Miyu. Let’s all work together to prepare the food!”

I can’t see any distortion from this person, either.

“I’ll try. Though, as Miss Ezez mentioned… I am not exactly skilled in the culinary arts myself.”

“Don’t worry too much about it. We make special kinds of food for the festivals.”

Miyu said, a special dish. Human meat would be too cliche for this case. Ezra and I followed the two into the kitchen inside the town hall. Around ten people are gathered in the kitchen, preparing ingredients for the food. The kitchen feels as snug as the rest of the village. The earthy smell of flour dough filled the air. Dewey and I stood before the kitchen counter. Ezra went to help Miyu with preparing ingredients. We washed our hands with soap. And I wore the apron Dewey gave.

“So, what are we going to make?”

“Bread and soup.”

“That’s rather simple for food served at a festival.”

“The plainness is what we’re trying to make here. Your mind becomes contaminated when you fill your stomach with delicious, extravagant food.”

…”Eating extravagant food contaminates the mind” is not an expression people would usually say.

“Contaminate the mind? That’s a novel way to put it.”

“Ahaha, you think so too, right? It’s what our town leader says. They work tirelessly for the mental soundness of our townspeople. This festival is a part of their efforts.”

“Will the mind become healthy after participating in the festival?”

“Of course! You’ll get to experience it as well, Miss Momo. During the festival, we wash away all the filth from our minds. Maybe that’s why our town hasn’t had any crime at all, unlike most other towns.”

While Dewey is speaking… something emerges from their chest. Tiny black arms crawl out. The Distortion is manifesting. What is this? Did the person just say something that provoked their own mind? Ezra and Miyu bring cleaned ingredients to us, and Dewey puts the ingredients in the pot, one by one. They wait for some time before adding each ingredient. Is there a specific order you’re supposed to follow or something?

“…Is this festival held every year?”

“No, it takes place monthly.”

“That’s a little different from most festivals I know. It must cost a tidy sum to stage it every month.”

“Haha, although we call it a festival, it’s actually rather simple and modest. We only serve bread and soup in these festivals, just like what we're preparing now. It doesn’t mean we put little care into cooking the food, though!”

A festival where the mind is cleansed, held once per month. This smells like a religious rite. Furthermore, this soup has no meat or any animal protein. It’s cooked purely with greens and vegetables. Carrots, potatoes, mushrooms, and more. It’s an average vegetarian food. Denouncing meat as an impure food is a belief commonly seen in many religious activities.

“Okay, Miss Momo. Let’s season the food with a pinch of salt now.”

A festival where the mind is cleansed. Townspeople whose Distortions cannot be seen. Dewey’s sudden manifestation of the Distortion. I need a few more clues to draw out an answer.

“Wait, Miss Momo! That’s sugar, not salt!”

The cooking is almost finished. I didn’t see any suspicious ingredients such as hallucinogens being added to the soup throughout the process. The festival is about to begin.

People sit around tables for six in the town hall cafeteria. Bowls of the soup we made are placed on each table. A loaf of baked bread is put

in front of each of us. Our table consisted of Ezra, Dewey, Miyu, myself, and lastly the town leader. Along with… a couple of life-sized wooden effigies. They're the figures the townsfolk were making during the daytime. The effigies also have soup and bread placed in front of them. I looked around. There's a stage at the front of the dining hall. On the stage is a steel chair. The cafeteria is structured in a way that people can see the stage from their tables.

"Sob, sob… Miss Momo… It's completely devoid of meat…"

Ezra whines, sitting across from me. I ignored her. There are more important matters to address. I can now see the Distortion from the townspeople. The degrees of their Distortions are all mild and slight, like Dewey's.

"I reckon not everyone in town has joined this festival?"

There are 57 people in this dining hall, excluding Ezra and I.

"No, that's not the case. All the villagers have gathered here."

The town leader answered. The town seemed to have about fifty households. If it's true that these people are the whole population of the town, that would mean most of them live alone. However, if I take the wooden effigies into account, the total becomes 102. That isn't far from my estimate. It's even possible that these effigies are occupying the seats where other townsfolk used to be. Where have they disappeared to? I need to investigate that.

"You must be remarkably pure of heart, Miss Momo."

The town leader spoke graciously.

“…I don’t see any filth in you.”

A mysterious phrase.

“Now, everyone! Let the harvest festival begin!”

The town leader stood up and announced with a loud voice.

“Let us laugh first!”

All the townsfolk burst out in laughter at the same time, including Dewey and Miyu. I laughed along. In a festival you’re joining for the first time, you have to observe the mood and the people and follow their behavior accordingly. Ezra awkwardly laughed. The collective laughing fit went on for ten minutes. When the town leader abruptly stopped laughing, the townspeople simultaneously quieted down. The town leader sat down. The Distortions of the people progressed a little.

“Let us eat the soup.”

The leader spoke with majesty. The soup has a clean, savory taste. The bowl wasn’t too large, so I could eat all of it before five minutes passed.

“Let us gush out our anger!!! You filthy, heinous bastards!!!”

The town leader lashed out at the wooden effigy sitting at our table.

People all yelled profanities too vulgar for description at the effigies sitting at their tables. What are they upset about? Dewey and Miyu are doing the same, swearing with forbidding faces. Ezra and I followed suit. The townspeople's Distortions progress further. Once again, when the town leader stopped cursing, the whole cafeteria fell quiet.

"Let us eat the bread."

The town leader said, slowing their ragged breath. It's an ordinary loaf of buttered bread made from flour. The loaf is about the size of a fist. It doesn't have any particular flavor. The people quietly ate the bread.

Karomck

I could hear a loud noise of teeth biting into something hard next to me.

"Ah…"

Dewey started bleeding from their mouth. A black object was inside the bread they were holding. That seems to be what broke their teeth. … That thing feels familiar for some reason.

"…A round of applause!"

Following the town leader's words, all the people clapped in unison.

“Dewey. Go to the chair.”

“…Yes.”

Dewey slowly rose from the seat and walked to the front of the dining hall. They climbed to the stage and sat on the steel chair.

“Let us all cry for Dewey, who will receive all of our filth…”

The town leader says, gritting their teeth and dropping tears. Everyone in the dining hall wails. The people cried their hearts out for Dewey. … Something starts happening. The Distortions of the townsfolk grow severe. The leader puts a tiny black box on Dewey’s head. That thing bears a close resemblance to the box we saw at Tae-young Produce Co. The only difference is the size. …I see now. I have to put a stop to this now if I want to save Dewey. My head is ringing from all the cries. The box begins to vibrate.

“Detective Moses… This is…!”

YuRia whispered.

“Ezra! Pull Dewey out of the chair right now!”

“Got it, Detective!!!”

Ezra sprinted from her seat without delay.

This is similar to the case of Tae-young Produce Co; Distortions flow out of people. A stream of Distortions akin to a river is made. The extracted Distortions seep into Dewey, who is crying. Miyu screams as the Distortion manifests from her body. Her Distortion is then pulled out of her, flowing to Dewey. Dewey is taking up all the Distortions of the villagers. In their words, they're receiving their filth. The place is filled with the sound of laments. Dewey's body gradually swells in an unstable manner. …This is driving me mad.

Ezra stormed out to save Dewey, but she soon falters and kneels down. Even Ezra's Distortion is about to be pulled out. What happens if the Distortion is extracted from a person? Will the mental scars associated with it be erased…? No, this is not the time to think about such things. I smashed my right elbow on the table. A blade extends from my prosthetic arm. The dining hall is still echoing with sorrowful cries.

"Stop what you're doing this instant!"

I held the blade of my prosthetic arm at the town leader's throat.

"Everyone! Let us rejoice now! Rejoice!"

The town leader shouted without so much as a flinch. The townspeople cheered. Their shouts of joy could be better described as screams.

"Let us bid farewell! Make their parting a joyful one!"

As soon as they finished their words, the stage floor beneath Dewey opened, causing them to fall through the gap. A dull sound was heard moments later. Judging from the interval between the fall and the echo, the basement space isn't deep below. The stream of Distortions follows Dewey into the space below the stage. The trapdoor begins to close. The screams of bliss continue.

"Ezra! We need to go after Dewey!!!"

I ran forward and helped Ezra up.

Curses. The trapdoor is about to close. I used all of my strength to get up to the stage carrying Ezra, who was on the verge of fainting. I pushed her down the opening before making the fall myself.

Thud

I fell on top of Ezra. We thankfully didn't fall from a height too high. When I looked up, the ceiling was already shut on us. I can still faintly hear the cheering of the townspeople.

A putrid smell stings my nose. I had a look at my surroundings.

“Detective Moses… Look over there.”

YuRia said, her voice shaking.

…You’ve got to be kidding.

I placed my hand on my forehead.

This is a prison.

The Distortion of Distortions. This isn't the Distortion of a single individual; it’s an amalgamation of people’s Distortions. There are forty five of such Distortions down here. They match the number of wooden effigies I saw above. These are multiple Distortions coalesced into large masses; I cannot begin to speculate the cause or abilities of these entities.

Dewey moans and squirms. Their flesh expands and bursts. From the ruptures, arms and legs grow out. A swarm of butterflies come forth. Soapsuds pour out.

Utterly unfathomable Distortions start crawling in our direction.

I don’t have my pipe with me. Ezra is lying unconscious.

Fortunately, there’s a door behind us.

“…YuRia, can you open your workshop now?”

I quietly spoke.

“Huh? Yes, I can!”

“Then summon it now!”

“Understood, Detective Moses!”

YuRia hopped out of my shoulder and touched the steel door.

Now… If I could open this door…

I pulled the knob of the steel door. However, it won’t budge. I used a Fairy I’d been keeping in the inner coat of my pocket and gave it another try. The steel door still refuses to move. That means this door isn’t a locked portal that leads to another space. This is functionally closer to a wall. It has been sealed from the outside, defined as a door

that won't ever see its intended use.

The Distortion is getting closer to us.

I kept forcefully pulling the door knob with all my might. My right arm was stretched tight. I have nothing else but the motor strength of my prosthetic arm to rely on. This is an expensive arm Ezra picked for me. Hoping that Ezra's choice of prosthetic limb was correct, I pulled the door knob using all of my strength. Steel chafing against the door frame produced a loud, grating noise. The ear-piercing screech drew the attention of a bestial Distortion, which then started running toward me. Dammit… The screws on my right arm squeak. The joints connecting the prosthetic arm to my shoulder are starting to break from the strain, blood leaking from the opened gaps. …This hurts like hell. I shut my eyes tight, and squeezed out my strength one more time.

KRRRANG!!! With a roaring metallic noise, the door swung open.

A flash of yellow light bolted across the room in a straight line.

A gaping hole was made in the body of the beast-like Distortion that

had almost reached me.

The yellow harpoon got lodged in the wall on the opposite side of the room.

Vespa stands in front of the opened door, with matted hair and a haggard look.

He looked around for a bit before drawing his yellow hwando.

“…Doctor Moses. You will have to take responsibility for what you’ve done.”

Glaring at me, Vespa spoke in a deep voice.

Chapter 25: The Cellar

Don’t be mistaken. I’m not offering you a deal this time. This is a threat.

“…But before that, we’ll have to handle this situation. I assume these creatures are of a similar nature to what was filmed in your footage.”

Vespa mused before charging into the Distortions. The creatures, each distorted in their own right, are slashed with the same blade leaving a yellow trail in its path. When Vespa lifts his right arm, the harpoon stuck in the wall returns to his hand. It seems his broken arm has completely healed up. He slashes one Distortion after another with flamboyant yet disciplined movement. A pointy tentacle rapidly extending from a Distortion gets sliced before it reaches him. A beastly paw swung at him falls to the floor as a trail of yellow light passes through it. After neutralizing each Distortion, Vespa thrusts his sword and harpoon into them to end them for good. The subdued Distortions soon restore their human form, albeit as corpses brutally slashed and cut. I suppose this is the law of the phenomenon taking its inevitable course. As they transformed back into humans, the Distortions that had been shrouding them scattered away. They’re most likely returning to the people who they originally belonged to. Vespa continues to advance without a hitch, creating yellow trails with his blade. If my prediction is correct, the most dangerous Distortion should be lurking

in the deepest corner of this room; the victim of the first festival, who had to take up the Distortions of one hundred people. Their shape would be positively unimaginable. In our current state, there's no reason to take a gamble by confronting such a being. All we need to do is find a way out of this dungeon.

"Hey, Vespa! The Distortions he—"

Zing. A yellow harpoon grazed my face and nailed itself to the wall behind me. Blood flowed from the cut it bore on my left cheek.

"Silence, Doctor Moses. I do not wish to converse with a person who broke my trust."

…An obvious consequence.

"If you dare to run your mouth to me one more time before I ask first… My blade will slit your throat next."

Nothing I say to Vespa will get through to him right now. I tapped Ezra on the cheek, who was still unconscious. There is no mask on Ezra's face. Which means Dewey has a hold of Ezra's Distortion among many others. For Ezra to come back to her usual self, Dewey must die. This is the causality. I cannot solve the Distortions here using my usual methodology. They are the Distortions of so many people merged into one; it's impossible to face the pasts of each and every one of them. The only option remaining is to physically dismantle them like Vespa is doing. However, as a result… while Ezra could return to normal… we will have to kill all 45 people trapped in this cellar. Moreover, what will become of the townsfolk who will be subject to the accumulated backlog of their own Distortions pouring back into them at once? While it may be possible to solve their Distortions that only possess a single texture each as opposed to the amalgamations down here… Those

Distortions will be severe to say the least.

Distortion of a singular pattern… Now I see the picture; it was that son of a bitch Han Hee-joon's design to cause this. Distortions tangled with impurity are not what the Association needs. A pure Distortion manifested from a single person. If we took care of all the Distortions in this cellar, there will be 57 unmixed Distortions overground up for grabs. Saving everyone was never a viable option in the first place. There was no saving this town the moment the townspeople started passing their Distortions onto one another. The most reasonable choice I can make is to help kill all the Distortions in this cellar. And to solve the unmixed Distortions that will manifest in the town hall above with my methods. If I woke Ezra up and just ran away with her, I'd fail to save anyone. …I need my smoking pipe. But the pipe is in Vespa's possession…

"YuRia, is there any equipment in your workshop I could use?"

"Huh? Are you going to use it yourself, detective?"

"Yes."

"Those gadgets were all made with Ezra seonbae's strength in mind… The force will be too strong for you to handle."

"I just need something that can land one huge blow. This prosthetic arm can deal with the recoil…."

"Wait here for a second, then. I'll fetch something useful from my atelier."

YuRia ran to her workshop. I searched the room for Dewey. …Ezra can regain consciousness once Dewey has been disposed of. With Ezra awake, I will be able to talk to Vespa without losing my head. Many times have I sacrificed the lesser for the greater in my life. Whenever I make such a choice, I can't help but feel as if a corner of my heart were being cut out. I see a Distortion that appears to be Dewey crawling in a corner. It's not hostile. It wriggles on the wall, spewing butterflies, bubbles, paint, and other things from its body.

"Here it is, Detective Moses. You can equip it on your right arm."

YuRia handed me a giant glove. It looks like a power gauntlet made for Ezra.

"Careful, detective. That device was built specifically for Ezra seonbae to use."

I put the gauntlet on.

"YuRia, how do I use it?"

"Clench and unclench your fist twice, and then make a fist. Throw a punch once the gauntlet turns red."

What I can do for them is to end them in a single blow and make it as painless as possible. Dewey may not be aggressive for now, but they might retaliate fiercely if I provoked them. I closed and opened my hand as YuRia instructed. The glove vibrates, releasing hot steam. My hand was always forced. Even when there seemed to be choice, there was always a "right answer" I was obligated to choose. The glove was heated. Streams of steam escape, creating an intense noise. Vespa turns his head to catch a glimpse of me, then goes back to slashing Distortions. I threw my fist at the wall.

The sounds of crushing flesh and exploding mechanical parts rang through the cellar.

“Detective Moses…!”

YuRia shouted.

“Knngh…”

I grabbed a painkiller from my pocket and injected it in my chest.

Dewey returned to human form, or at least, their lower half did. No one will be able to tell that this cadaver was Dewey’s with its upper half missing. My face and clothes are smudged with bits of flesh and blood. The prosthetic arm has been reduced to pieces from the recoil, its components scattered all over the floor. My right shoulder was gone along with the arm. As YuRia expected, the force of the device was simply too strong for my body. …It served its purpose nonetheless. A mask appeared on Ezra’s face. I shambled to her and moved my left hand with as much strength as I could muster to wake her up.

“Nnh… Detective?”

“…You’re awake.”

“Gasp! What happened to your arm this time, detective?! Oh, detective… You’ve done it again! Getting yourself hurt while I’m away…!”

Ezra scolded me in a tearful voice.

“It’s not like I voluntarily walk into harm’s way. Okay now, I need to get my pipe back from Vespa.”

“Vespa…? Yeesh! Wha, how, what is he doing out here?!”

He’s made it quite far already. Talk about inexorable.

“I’ll explain the details later.”

Ezra can't manifest Psychoment like the last time, because YuRia couldn’t use her workshop to make more pendants. But we can still bluff.

“Ezra, stay alert and ready yourself for combat. A harpoon will come our way in a moment.”

I quietly whispered to Ezra, and she nodded as she put on her combat glove.

“Hey! Vespa!”

A flash of yellow light caught my eye. Zing. A harpoon came hurtling towards me. Ezra quickly deflected it by kicking its shaft with her right leg. The harpoon fails to reach me and gets stuck on the floor.

“I believe I warned you not to speak to me…”

Vespa was standing in front of me before I knew it. He is covered in bits and pieces of Distortions as well.

“Do you wish to… put a conclusion to our conflict now?”

Vespa said, sweeping up his rumpled hair. He looks haggard and gaunt, but he doesn’t appear tired at all. His eyes still gleam with energy.

“Think you can handle us in that condition?”

Shaking dust off her hands, Ezra boasted.

“Don’t be mistaken. I’m not offering you a deal this time. This is a threat.”

I looked into Vespa’s eyes.

“If you don’t follow my orders, you will die here. Besides, we’re in District 11.”

“Haah… Did you just say District 11…?”

Vespa lets out a deep sigh. It’s understandable that this news would hit him like a bolt from the blue. Then again, we merely did what we could to survive, and Vespa hunted us in order to get his work done. I shouldn’t let emotion get in the way of this factual matter.

“…What do you want this time, Doctor Moses.”

“My pipe.”

Vespa took the pipe out of his coat and tossed it to me. I caught it with

my left hand.

“And my right arm?”

“I ate it. After all, I had to survive by any means.”

In that instant, Ezra charged at Vespa with incredible speed. Ezra struck Vespa in the right cheek with her fist; Vespa instantaneously retaliated by striking his left knee into her chest. The two got into a melee, unfazed by each other’s blows. What a doggish mess.

“It’s like the fight between a golden retriever and a doberman.”

YuRia put my thoughts into words.[1]

“Ezra, that’s enough!”

I’ve lost my right shoulder. Even if I got my arm back, it would no longer be possible to attach it to my body. And I’m not a purist when it comes to body parts, either. Ezra took a quick step back and stood in front of me.

“Vespa, you said you saw the footage, right?”

“…I have.”

Vespa replied, spitting a bloody sputum onto the ground.

“The beings here are much the same as the creature in that video you saw, in essence. People with the know-how call them ‘Distortions’. These are not ordinary Distortions, however. They were artificially created, and are in fact Distortions of multiple people mixed together. It would be easier to understand if you view them as something similar to

the infamous Pianist."

"…Are they not similar to the monsters in the Outskirts anyway?"

"You could say that. Point is, simple physical force may not be enough to deal with some of them. There's no guarantee that their attacks will be physical, either. Didn't you feel it as you progressed further in?"

"How should we terminate them, then? Kill them with fire?"

"No. You'll need the powers of my smoking pipe. YuRia, I could use a twining ribbon."

"Yes, Detective Moses."

YuRia went into her workshop.

"…Doctor Moses, what is the purpose of taking up such an occupation?"

"To learn about the Distortion."

"Are you saying that you acted out of simple curiosity. You're rather selfish. Thanks to you, I have lost quite a few things."

"I won't deny it. I'm a selfish person as you said. I only act for the sake of self-satisfaction. You should know that neither of us are following some noble cause to begin with. You aren't seeking sympathy from me, are you?"

Vespa glared at me and put on a faint smile.

"You're right about that. We were simply doing our jobs."

“Detective Moses. Here it is. I worked as fast as I could to make it.”

YuRia shook my leg to grab my attention, and handed an orange ribbon to me.

“Ezra, tie this ribbon to my pipe for me.”

“Got it!”

I held the smoking pipe adorned with the orange ribbon in my hand. I missed this sensation. I blew a white breath into the pipe. The white smoke shrouds Vespa and Ezra, as well as permeating into his yellow hwando and her gloves.

“What is this, now…”

“It’ll protect you from psychological damage some Distortions will inflict. And the attacks you perform will leave more than just a physical impact.”

This is a method devised by YuRia and I. Based on the capability of the white breath to protect one from mental attacks, we perceived the idea that it could perhaps be used in an offensive way to cause the same kind of damage. The preparations are complete. We will head deeper into the cellar and take care of every Distortion in this place. And solve the Distortions of the townspeople above.

“Vespa, when this is over, I’ll do what I can to straighten out your situation.”

“…You certainly have a way with words, I will admit.”

“Well now, let’s head into the deeper areas.”

“Yes, detective!”

Vespa and Ezra led the way, with YuRia and I in tow. The Distortions assumed more disordered shapes the deeper we went. Ezra crushed them with her fists, and Vespa cut down the ones in his way one by one. The areas we passed through were littered with the bodies of people who were freed from the Distortion in death. I placed my hand on my forehead. I still haven’t grown indifferent to the weight of actions like this. It feels as though I am constantly committing sins. Despite that, we must advance.

With Vespa and Ezra’s forces combined, the Distortions are easily dealt with. Soon enough, we are faced with the one final Distortion remaining, inhabiting the deepest area. In spite of the white breath coiling around us, merely looking at it makes my head pound. It takes the form of a sphere of flesh that floats in the air. I cannot begin to imagine the desolation and anguish this person may have felt, storing the Distortions of one hundred people. Vespa throws a harpoon at it right away. Blood spurts from the wound it left on its body. However, the harpoon couldn’t dig deep into it. It’s only stuck on its surface. Dozens of arms radiate from the globular Distortion at once in response. The arms are all shaped differently, each composed of different types of matter. Vespa swiftly severs the arms and tentacles coming at us. Ezra pulls back and loads up strength on her arm, then lands her fist on the harpoon stuck on the Distortion for a smashing blow. Propelled by the impact of the punch, the harpoon managed to tear a sizable hole in the Distortion’s body. The gigantic heart lying at its center was exposed. That needs to be destroyed. The hole is slowly closing up.

“Ezra! Stop that open wound from closing! Vespa, cut the arms trying to grab Ezra! YuRia, tie a penetrating ribbon around my pipe!”

Ezra jumps into the Distortion to forcefully spread the rupture open. Vespa wards off the threats approaching Ezra. YuRia jumped from my shoulder onto my arm and tied a purple ribbon around my pipe. I took a deep, violet breath. The pipe assumed the shape of a matchlock rifle.

“Detective! The walls are closing in too tightly!”

I struggled to brace the gun against my shoulder using only my left arm.

“Doctor Moses, we need you to act quick.”

I have only one shot, and I must make it count. I put forth all of my concentration.

“Nnnngh! Detective!!!”

I pulled the trigger.

The bullet flew past Ezra’s head and hit the Distortion’s heart. The spherical Distortion squirmed and boiled for a short while, then blew up with a deafening blast. A stream of Distortions poured out from where it was and flowed away.

Covered in blood and flesh, we stood before the corpse of a young person whose heart was punctured.

Chapter 26: Expulsion

I let out a deep, pale breath.

There are no more Distortions left in the cellar. All that remains are the bodies of 46 people.

“…Go ahead and tell us what to do next, Doctor Moses.”

Vespa asked me in a cynical tone.

“Huff… We should go up, of course.”

I can’t put my hand on my forehead or smoke from my pipe anymore. I can’t seem to move my left shoulder as I will. I twisted and moved every part of my body I could to aim the rifle with only one arm, but I guess that wasn’t enough to mitigate the gun’s recoil. My left shoulder is dislocated, and my right shoulder is gone. I’m completely powerless.

“Ezra, please carry me on your back.”

“You bet, detective!”

“Vespa, I want you to exert physical strength on my behalf for a while. I can only take responsibility for you after we’ve finished this job.”

“…If you wish.”

Vespa gave an icy reply. Ezra picked up the smoking pipe on the floor

and held me in her arms.

“Ezra, I asked for a piggyback, not this?”

“It’s easier for me to respond to danger in this pose!”

Can’t believe I’m being carried like a bride at this age. I yielded myself to Ezra’s embrace. YuRia was sitting on top of her head before I noticed.

Leaving this cellar is going to be a fairly easy task. The floor of the stage we fell from didn’t appear to be very solid, and it isn’t too high above us, so Ezra and Vespa will be able to easily break the ceiling and secure us an exit. The real problem is what comes after we go up. I’m frankly afraid to imagine what kind of scenery might await us. We traced our way back to where we fell. YuRia closed the door to her workshop and withdrew it. When we opened the steel door again, a heap of rocks were waiting on the other side. The wall of large rocks crudely and doggedly piled on top of one another is reminiscent of the townspeople’s vehement disregard.

“The exit is right above us, Vespa.”

“Am I to slash open the ceiling?”

“Yes.”

Vespa brandished his blade without asking further. After a few trails of yellow light flashed in the air, the stage floor broke down. Ezra smoothly dodges the debris falling from above. We jumped up to the ground floor.

When we got up, carnage was unfolding before our eyes. The polychromatic scene stimulates and overwhelms my mind. A hellish landscape we can do nothing to fix. This might be one of the five most detestable sceneries I have seen in my life. Right… This is what is destined to happen when Distortions are entwined with each other. This is not like what happened in the cellar. While the Distortions I faced down below were akin to people with multiple heads each asserting their own thoughts, the ones here are independent beings expressing their unadulterated desires. I should've known that better than anyone, yet I was oblivious of the fact. No, I merely buried it in the back of my mind, not wanting to bring it up again.

"Doctor Moses. I regret to inform you that I am not capable enough to control this situation."

Vespa said in a low-pitched voice.

"Detective Moses… The situation here looks worse than in the basement…?"

YuRia said, hiding on the back of Ezra's head. I can hear Ezra gulp from nervousness. The Distortions, each different from the rest, are killing each other in their unique ways. The strong harass and tear into the weak, as if to flaunt and demonstrate their powers. This scenery is the truest manifestation of the town's collective mind that had been suppressed until now. A glaring variety of colorful Distortions grapple and rip one another; this is what I would call the festival of the town. … Can I really manage to save one of them. Noticing our presence, some of the Distortions turn to us and fix their gazes. A white-furred beast in the shape of an ape that has no eyes. A red tetrahedron with eight eyes. A yellow mantis with the head of a lion. I sense hostility from those three entities. Vespa and Ezra will be able to handle the ape and the mantis somehow. The tetrahedron, on the other hand… My pipe

will be needed. I closed my eyes. And I made up my mind.

“…Ezra, put the pipe in my mouth, please.”

“Yes! Detective!”

I ought to save at least one of these Distortions. The choice I made in the cellar will be pointless otherwise. Ezra placed the pipe to my lips as I asked.

I let out a deep, pale breath; it’s the sensation of lifeforce leaving the body. This breath is beautiful for it is respired at the cost of life. A translucent, turquoise powder taking on the hue of apatite scattered over the town hall. Casting a blue glow, the powder adheres to the Distortions. They begin to slow down not long after. This is a powder of death. It brings the living closer to mortality. Death signifies silence and cessation. All living beings are brought to a stop.

…My lungs aren’t big enough to exhale a breath that can stall this many Distortions at once. Still, it’ll earn me some time to confront at least one Distortion. Even if I can only save one of them, I must do what I can. Dammit, this might very well be my last breath.

“Detective! You promised not to use that breath!!!”

Ezra blew a gasket. I ignored her furious scolding.

“…Vespa. Don’t strike the Distortions unless they attack first.”

“I’m afraid I won’t be able to obey that, Doctor Moses.”

Vespa reaches for the hilt of his sword.

It would appear that his patience has reached its limit.

And yet I thought I could reason with this young man to an extent…

‘BANG!’ A blast similar to the explosion of a firework was heard from outside the town hall.

And footfalls rumble the ground at the same time. I can hear the steps of multiple people, all wearing shoes.

Familiar footsteps I’ve heard in the past.

A group of people in black longcoats and golden masks adorned with the single symbol of an eye storm into the building.

…Fixers under Dias’ immediate supervision.

Udjat.

They form a dark wave as they wield their scimitars and ruthlessly charge into the Distortions.

…So that’s how it is.

The Distortions, rendered immobile by the pale breath, are helplessly incapacitated one by one.

“Please forgive our abruptness, Doctor Moses. And I must say, you didn’t disappoint. I knew I could trust you to subdue the Distortions of this town without unnecessary casualty.”

Han Hee-joon walks towards us from the town hall’s entrance.

This request wasn’t issued by the Seven Association.

…Han Hee-joon. He once again serves as Dias' obedient little lapdog, he always has.

I'm a hypocrite.

Once again, I couldn't save anyone.

Our party and Vespa were moved to a corner of the town square where we sat down to lick our wounds. Udjat, the private military force under Dias's command, cleanly sorted out the town's situation. They cage the Distortions and make assiduous preparations to transport them, as well as treating our injuries with great care. Ezra won't say a word. She still seems upset about me using the pale breath. Then, Han Hee-joon approached us.

"Doctor Moses. Have this cup of warm tea as you rest."

"What is Dias planning to do with the Distortions?"

"How can I possibly grasp what's on her mind."

"……"

"Anyway, I didn't quite expect you to be with Vespa Crabro, the taboo hunter of N Corp."

"Is he that famous?"

"Those in the know are familiar with him. I work for Seven Association, you know?"

Ezra and Vespa are sitting next to me, still keeping their mouths shut.

"And I've brought news for you, Vespa Crabro, sir."

Is there any sincerity in a thing Han Hee-joon says? He knows everything he needs to know. Even the fact that Vespa will be with us.

"…What is it."

Han Hee-joon handed an envelope over to Vespa. He opened it and took out the letter inside, shortly before crumpling it and throwing it to the ground.

"Han Hee-joon. Give this poor fellow a shirt or any clothing to put on. It's embarrassing to look at you know."

The jacket and shirt Vespa was wearing have been torn to rags after repeated battle.

"As you wish, Doctor Moses."

Han Hee-joon beckoned his finger to an Udjat, who brought him a white dress shirt.

“I’ll invite you and your company to Lady Dias’ place once this has been tidied up.”

“Let me ask you something, Hee-joon.”

“What is it, Doctor Moses?”

“Is it fun to mess around, sitting on the top of my head?”

“It’s not very pleasant, to be honest.”

After saying goodbye, Han left us and walked off to the site of apprehension for the Distortions.

“…I hear that you can see the Distortion from people?”

Looking at me, Vespa asked.

“Yes.”

I answered, smoking a cigarette with my patched up left hand.

”Then tell me, Doctor Moses, what do you see from me right now…”

“…I see the tattered wings of a bee on your back.”

Vespa has been expelled from N Corp.

EXPULSION

Chapter 27: The Mansion

Once again, I set out for a fallen Nest.

We're in Han Hee-joon's car, driving down the road. Udjat's vehicles follow us, loaded with the Distortions they've captured. The atmosphere in the car is comparable to that of a funeral. No one dares to speak first. Only Ezra is being fidgety, struggling to withstand this mood. She's not one to break the silence, though.

"Where are we headed?"

It was Vespa; he opened his mouth and spoke in a raspy voice.

"You have been invited. You'll be able to give your tired and injured bodies a much needed rest there."

Han Hee-joon answered.

We're headed to Dias' place, I bet. This is awful. I can already picture what will happen once we arrive in my head. Right now, I have no choice but to play into her hands.

"So, have we passed her little test?"

"Yes. My personal impression is that your way of handling matters and the results it produces are excellent as I thought, Doctor Moses. I'm

certain milady will think likewise.”

“Sure she will.”

Driving along curvy roads, we arrived at a mansion lit with fanciful lights. A Backstreets inhabitant couldn’t ever dream to earn a tiny room in a house like this, even if they worked their tail off for their entire life. To add insult to injury, this isn't a house where Dias permanently resides. It’s a vacation home, a place as significant to her as a pair of shoes stored in the corner of a closet that may or may not be worn someday. She probably owns at least one mansion like this in every Nest. After we step out of the car, Han Hee-joon leads the way for us. Before long, Dias came running to me with open arms and hugged me.

“…Moses, sweetheart! You must’ve taken great pains to get your job done! Good work, darling!”

“I see you’re still having fun playing with me like a puppet on a string.”

“Don’t be so cold about it! I knew you could do a wonderful job handling it. Right, Hee-joon?”

“Yes, indeed.”

A sudden growl interrupts the conversation. Sigh… Ezra’s belly is such an honest alarm.

“…S-sorry.”

“Oh, Ezra! I knew you were starving, you poor baby girl!! I prepared a ton of rare dishes for you! Come on, let’s eat together~!”

“Can this sassy boy clad in yellow dine as well?”

I asked, pointing at Vespa.

“Mm.”

Dias answered in a completely apathetic tone.

More than a hundred kinds of dishes are placed on the long dinner table. And only six people sit around this table. That means most of the food will go to waste. Each plate of food on this table probably costs as much as a house in a residential area of the Backstreets. In that sense, could this meal be considered extravagant? Such a description only applies to consumption beyond one’s means. Dias can easily afford this and more. To her, this meal would be the equivalent of purchasing a sandwich at your local HamHamPangPang.

“I’m sure you set up that scheme because there’s something you want me to do… Cut to the chase, will you?”

“Can you go to L Corp’s Nest?”

Dias says with a merry smile.

“Are you referring to Lobotomy Corporation, a Wing that recently fell?”

Vespa said impassively.

“Mhm.”

Dias replied to him without so much as giving a glance in his direction.

“You still haven’t done away with that dream, huh.”

“Of course not! I’m a girl with many dreams, you know? Isn’t that right, Ezra?”

“…Yeah.”

L Corp…

Once again, I set out for a fallen Nest.

This is the first time I’m making a journey to such a place since the Smoke War.

It brings back several memories—

“The night is long, Moses… Let me tell you all about the favors I want to ask of you, taking all the time we need.”

Oh, for the Wings’ sake…

- Translation Notes:

No we are not sneaking HamHamPangPang product placements into the English text. Mister Jihoon has included them in the original dialogue.

Chapter 28: Our Mission

Dias never lies. She won’t tell the full truth, either.

“Are you proposing that I work for you like I used to?”

“I won’t ask you to be an Udjat, no. I’d like to hire Miss Moses as the Distortion Detective!”

The fallen Nest of L Corp. has now likely become a battlefield for numerous Syndicates and Fixers. What can the Distortion Detective do in the midst of such strife fought with cold weapons?

“Aww, Ezra~ It’s so nice to see you enjoy your meal!”

Dias said with a smile in her eyes. Ezra is conscious of Dias’ attention, but she still hastily fills her stomach with the food on the table. What’s more astonishing was the speed at which Vespa consumed his share. It almost looks as if he were inhaling food, rather than dining like one normally would. Perhaps my prediction was incorrect. Maybe there won’t be any food left to go to waste. Leaving the two to their meal, I continued the conversation with Dias.

“Dias. You seemed to be interested in capturing Distortions alive.”

“Mhm! That’s right.”

“Are you trying to fulfill your dreams by using them?”

“Mmm… Half right, half wrong!”

Dias never lies. She won’t tell the full truth, either. That’s the kind of fellow she was. She’s set a clear limit on how much she is willing to share.

“Will we find larger numbers of Distortions to capture in L Corp’s Nest? Or, is there a particular Distortion you’re keeping an eye on in that place?”

“Do you have any idea what’s going on in Nest L right now, sweetheart?”

Dias gives me a poignant stare, pulling her eyebrows together. What an abominable look.

“Lady Dias. May I have the pleasure of explaining this part to her?”

Han Hee-joon butts in.

“Mkay! I’ll leave it to you, Hee-joon. I’m a total klutz at exposition.”

Han Hee-joon looked into my eyes as if to seek my nonverbal agreement before giving the brief.

“L Corp’s Nest is currently under a shroud of fog, it is of unknown origin.”

A shroud of fog… Another resemblance to the Smoke War.

“The situation isn’t quite like the Smoke War. This fog simply hinders

any attempts to observe by obstructing vision. Anyone who enters ends up getting lost."

Still, I imagine quite the bloodshed is going on in the Nest.

"And as you suspect, Syndicates and Fixers are murdering one another in that place."

"…Because it's a tempting opportunity to make a fortune."

"You would be correct."

"Have the Fingers stuck into the metaphorical pie as well?"

"The Thumb and the Index have made a move."

The Index of all things. That's a bugger.

"So, what is the reason you're sending me into that warzone? I'm not seeing how any of this is relevant to the Distortion."

Dias glances at me with one eye open, taking a sip of tea.

"There have been an extraordinary number of reports that are thought to be cases of the Distortion in that Nest."

"Didn't you just say it's impossible to observe things in there?"

"The fog merely makes it difficult to navigate your way in the Nest. We do acquire clear reports of what people encounter within the foggy Nest."

"You want us to capture Distortions alive from there?"

“That is correct, and there is more. We want the Distortion in a more complete form. Let the Distortion progress further, foster it if necessary.”

“Stir people’s minds even more? How far does it have to go?”

“Doctor. Are you familiar with the term: ‘Abnormality’?”

“Abnormality? No. Never heard of it.”

“In that case, I’ll leave it up to your judgement.”

“I’m only a Fixer that resolves Distortions.”

“That makes you the most adequate person for the task of neutralizing them.”

“Fine. What comes next? Tell Ezra to carry the Distortion on her shoulder?”

Startled, Ezra paused her busy hands and shook her head while looking me in the eye.

“Udjat will come to pick it up when you do.”

“How convenient. Are they going to accompany us or something?”

“Do you need the support of Udjat?”

“Nope. I hate traveling in crowds.”

“I figured you’d say so.”

“If one is prone to getting lost within the Nest and surveillance over distance is out of the question, how are they going to find us?”

Dias smiled and gave me a well-packaged box as though she were waiting for me to bring up the issue.

“Here! A gift for my dear Moses!”

“It’s a prosthetic arm.”

“A one-of-a-kind arm, you won’t find anything like it in the City! I spent tons of money on this!”

It’s extremely unusual for Dias to consider any expenditure large. Whatever this thing is, it must be a work of insanity.

“With this arm equipped, Udjat will be able to locate you. You can also communicate with me.”

“That means I’ll have to listen to your soddy voice wherever I am.”

Which means that this thing is a shackle. Heavy fetters attached to my ankles that won’t let me escape her notice no matter where I go.

“How many Distortions do you want captured?”

“Until I’m satisfied~!”

I’m holding back my boiling urge to punch that face.

“…Yes. You are to secure Distortions until Lady Dias is satisfied by the amount. And…”

“And?”

“Do you remember the black box you saw in Tae-young Produce Co.?”

“Yes.”

“That box was procured from L Corp’s Nest.”

“You’re telling me to find and bring more of those boxes as well.”

The black box that generated Distortions. Dias collects Distortions. And plans to create them herself. So that’s how it is. With the technology in her hands, she might be able to achieve whatever filthy dream she has.

“And why should I take this job?”

“…Because this might be your chance to atone for your past, doctor.”

I took out my smoking pipe and bit it in my mouth.

“Please remain calm. I’m saying this sincerely.”

I puffed out smoke.

“Doctor Moses. Please refrain from smoking at the dinner table.”

Vespa scowled at me and grouched in a deep voice.

“I don’t mind it? Don’t give him any attention and smoke all you want, Moses, dear~!”

Dias retorted right away.

I internally let out a deep sigh, and put the pipe back in my pocket.

“We’d like you to lend a hand as well, Vespa, sir.”

“Why is that.”

“Because you might be reinstated in the Wing with milady’s help.”

“……”

“I’ll regard that silence as a sign of agreement.”

“Okay. Let’s say this whole deal makes sense. Where do you want us to begin?”

“We have multiple candidates: Laundry of Dreams, the Human Thunderbolt, The Library, Yesterday’s Promise, The 8 o’Clock Circus, the Church of Gears, Man-Eating Sandw—”

“That’s enough.”

All ungraceful names. That's how the Association usually designates names for cases.

“I’ll start with the Laundry of Dreams. Its grade?”

“Urban Legend.”

An Urban Legend… Should be a good exercise.

“The Library is an Urban Legend as well, what do you think about that one?”

“I don’t get good vibes out of it.”

“Understood.”

“I’ll be taking off tomorrow.”

“Whaaat~? But Moses! I wouldn’t mind if you stayed here and played with me for a week or so…”

I left her behind and headed outside.

I enjoy a bit of solitude on the terrace, smoking from my pipe. It’s quite a contrast to the scenery I usually see from my Office. The yard of this mansion seems endless. Beautiful lights illuminate the vast garden.

“Detective… Are you really gonna be alright?”

Ezra came to my side and asked.

“Have you mellowed out, Ezra?”

“…Yeah. I get it, that was the only option you had. But… Promise not to use that pale breath ever again, for real this time! I know what it does… If you use that power, your lifespan gets…”

“Ezra. I know that better than anyone. Of course I value my own life. I made that choice to use it so we could survive.”

“…Kay.”

“Go to bed now. We’ve got work to do tomorrow.”

“Detective… About the atonement thing Hee-joon seonbae mentioned… Are you really going to do it?”

“…Yes.”

The morning draws on. I equipped the prosthetic arm Dias gave and prepared myself for the trip. Han Hee-joon is waiting for us at the garden entrance, next to a black van. Vespa and Ezra are loading the boot of the van with various gadgets. I placed my pipe in my mouth.

“Lady Dias departed at dawn for someplace else. She wanted to say her apologies for not giving you a proper farewell.”

“Right.”

I puffed out smoke from the pipe.

“And Miss YuRia. There’s no need to pose as a normal teddy bear in front of me.”

Han Hee-joon quietly spoke to YuRia, who was sitting on my shoulder. The plush doll flinched a little.

“Udjat will set up an outpost near Nest L. You may head into the Nest first.”

“Guess we’ll have to go by car with Ezra as our driver. Maybe I should bring sickness pills.”

“I’ll take the wheel.”

Vespa showed up from behind and walked toward the driver's seat.

"Are you a good driver?"

"You won't be disappointed."

I got in the van with a bitter smile. This pitiful young man has become yet another toy in Dias' hands.

"Doctor. I will be contacting you later."

I gestured at him to sod off. Soon afterwards, the van's engine roared to life as it began to move.

It's the beginning of another damned journey.

Chapter 29: Safe Passage

Vespa returned to the driver’s seat.

The ride is surprisingly comfortable. Vespa was right in that I wouldn’t be disappointed in his driving skills. A good vehicle has met an excellent driver.

We’re quietly driving along the highway leading to L Corp’s Nest. In the back seat, I opened the envelope Han Hee-joon gave me. It’s a brief report on the Nest and the Laundry of Dreams. The Distortion is located in the Backstreets of Nest L, situated in the southern part of the City. The Nest is currently covered in a veil of fog due to the fall of Lobotomy Corporation, the Wing. Its Nest is doomed to collapse as a result. No Wing falls with grace. They leave a permanent scar on the City before crumbling to dust. In the case of this L Corp, that would be the fog. They say everyone loses their way in that fog. And a variety of Syndicates and Fixers in the Nest are drawing their weapons against one another. To think that the Distortion is rampant in this chaos… It will be akin to a battlefield for sure.

Skipping past the tidbits of info on the misty Nest, I skimmed through the report on the Laundry of Dreams. It was degraded from an Urban Plague to Urban Legend. According to the report, it was initially designated as an Urban Plague after wiping out an entire Office of Fixers, but it has since stepped down a grade as it did not cause any notable events afterwards.

“…So, what is the task we’re supposed to take care of.”

Vespa asks from the driver's seat, his eyes facing forward.

"I was just about to read over that part."

"An ordinary coin-op on the outside. But, after you use it… You come out a completely different person?"

YuRia read out the report from the top of my shoulder.

"Detective! Is this gonna be a location-type Distortion like the Mock Exam one?"

Ezra turned her head and said from the passenger seat.

"Are you referring to some kind of test?"

Vespa spoke, his gaze still fixed on the road ahead.

"Ezra. Tell him about the classifications we established while doing our detective work."

"Got it!"

Ezra rummaged through her bag for a notebook. It has a yellow cover plastered with stickers, a glaring hallmark of Ezra's possession. She riffles the pages until she puts a finger on a certain page as if she spotted something.

"Hm hm. Let this senior give YuRia the protégé and Vespa the baby bee of the team a lecture on the Distortion!"

I could see a vein pop out between Vespa's brows right as she said that. Ezra studies his face for a moment, then continues her lesson.

“It’s some high-quality intel organized by Detective Moses and her capable sidekick Ezra, all based on the experience of working as the Distortion Detective! As you all know, our mentor Moses can see the Distortion. ‘Distortion’ is the name given to this phenomenon by the Hana Association. According to the data registered to the Association database…”

“It’s a phenomenon where people would suddenly transform and take monstrous shapes.”

“…I heard about the phenomenon in relation to the Pianist case of District 9.”

“Yep, you two are on the right track!”

Before I knew it, the drive turned into a little class.

“However, our mentor and detective Moses thinks there’s more to the Distortion than just people turning into monsters! She sees the Distortion as a person’s mind bursting forth into something tangible.”

“And the detective can see the Distortion before it actually manifests.”

“Mmhmm. That’s how our Office can solve cases before the Distortion fully manifests!”

“Is it up to Moses to determine whether a case of the Distortion has fully manifested?”

“It’s *Detective* Moses, lil’ junior Vespa!”

Vespa pops another vein on his forehead.

“…Is it up to Detective Moses to determine the severity…”

“Yup! She’s classified different types of Distortions and the stages of progression. Every Distortion has a cause behind it. From that, we connect the dots to explain how that cause was responsible for the person distorting. Next, we give the explanation to the subject in a way that they can accept… If they do, we can resolve the case before the Distortion manifests!”

“Can the same be done to cases of the Distortion that already have manifested?”

Vespa turned his head towards me and asked. To that, I quietly answered.

“Depends on the progress and category.”

I updated my knowledge on the Distortion after the recent series of events.

“I want you to pay attention to this one, Ezra.”

“Yes, detective!”

Ezra turned to a new page and picked up a pen.

“Until recently, I only categorized Distortions by type, but I’ve included severity in my newest classification system: incubation period, early stage, middle stage, and terminal stage.”

“It’s like the staging of a disease.”

YuRia made a snarky remark. She’s not wrong, however. To me, the

Distortion is a disease.

“Most people’s Distortions are in the incubation period. As you’re all aware, I can see the Distortion before it manifests. Thus, I decided to title the earliest stage where the Distortion becomes visible to me as the incubation period.”

“I’d like to know the severity of the bee’s wings you can see from me.”

“In my opinion, your Distortion is at an early stage. Although I’m speaking from my subjective point of view, from what I can see, Distortions in the incubation period are mostly fragmentary. An early-stage Distortion is still minor, but it assumes a definite form. And I can feel the early symptoms of it. An example is the fact that I can feel the breeze generated by the beats of your wings, Vespa. No one else here would be able to sense it. Only I can see and perceive it. This is what I classify as an early symptom.”

“If it’s something only you can feel, it must’ve been a useful ability for you to find and resolve Distortions.”

“I think so too. But sometimes, it makes me feel unwanted sensations and pain no one else could feel.”

Rumble. The car shook a little. We came off the highway and entered a narrow road toward L Corp’s Nest. A thin veil of mist obscures the view out the window. The time is 1 PM. Sunlight scatters and shimmers in the mist.

“…We’ll listen to the rest of the explanation later.”

A group of a dozen or two people are blocking the way. Are they Fixers or Syndicate members that seized hold of this area? I want to avoid

unnecessary conflict if possible. Vespa stopped the car. The group approaches us. Knock knock. One of them raps the car window. Vespa lowered it in response.

“Going on a little family trip, are ya?”

A woman puts her arm on the windowsill and asks in a serious manner. She has irezumi[1] tattooed on her arms. In her other hand is a cigarette. The irezumi on her arms is no doubt an augmentation tattoo. People carrying katanas at the girdle stand in front of the car, staring at us with their arms crossed.

“What’s your business?”

Vespa inquired with his eyes closed, not even giving a second of a glance at the woman. Ezra has her hand over her dimensional bag, preparing for combat. It seems we’re dealing with a Syndicate.

“You’re about to enter Kurokumo Clan’s territory, you see. You’re gonna have to pay a small toll to pass.”

Kurokumo Clan… I’m unfamiliar with the name. Anyhow, it’s interesting to note how Syndicates in the southern side of the City tend to be dressed in composed clothes, unlike those in the north.

“Detective…?”

“…Ezra. Just give them what they want.”

We’re giving money-hungry scoundrels what they ask for. No matter how high they set the bid, it’ll still be well within the budget Dias gave us.

“How much do you need?”

Ezra's face puckered as she asked the Syndicate member, reluctant to give away our money.

“Weeeeell…“

Bewildered by our generous attitude, the Syndicate member looked us up and down.

“2 million Ahn.”

“Nyehii…!”

It seems Ezra begrudges our money going to them. However, I don’t mind the loss as long as it is the only thing we have to give up. There’s no reason to take a gamble against a Syndicate with unknown power and affiliation just to save money. Ezra took a bundle of cash out of her bag and started counting it.

“…Changed my mind. 10 million.”

The goon said with a chuckle. Staring down the pile of money must’ve made them cuckoo.

“Sob, sob… Detective…”

“Give it to them.”

“Kay…”

Ezra passed the 10 million Ahn through the driver’s side window. Meanwhile, Vespa remains perfectly still, his eyes shut. I can see that

this Syndicate has some experience, considering they didn't go as far as demanding every coin from us. Rookies tend to keep raising the stakes until it bites them in the ankle. On the other hand, the more experienced ones assess the opponent's capacity and stop at an acceptable price.

"Aight, be on your way. And cutie, you can have this."

Ezra was handed a black plastic plate.

"It's a pass. That thing should let you freely get through any area under Kurokumo Clan's rule. I'm Yuri, one of the vice captains of da Kurokumo Clan. Y'know, I like you gals. Why don'tcha tell my name when you drop by a bar for a drink, I'll pay the tab for ya."

That was resolved smoothly.

"Have a happy-sappy little family trip~"

Vice Captain Yuri ground her cigarette on the side mirror of our vehicle.

Her head was gone in the blink of an eye.

"Oh, for f… Vespa!"

Vespa's fist cleanly removed the vice captain's head from her body with a single thrust. He calmly steps out of the car and cleans the cigarette ash off the side mirror. The unexpected event left everyone quiet. Vespa proceeded to grab his hwando from the side of the driver's seat and charged into the group of thugs. Amidst the thin fog, flashes of yellow light shined, followed by spurts of blood.

Another moment of silence passed.

Vespa returned to the driver's seat.

"…The next time you want to cause a pointless bloodshed, you'll do it over my cold, dead body."

I said, placing a hand on my forehead.

"I'll try not to."

Vespa grabbed the wheel and started driving.

- Translation Notes:

[1] Irezumi (入れ墨): A special type of Japanese tattooing.

Chapter 30: Chatter

“You could publish an encyclopedia of Distortions with all that knowledge.”

“You said you weren’t a fan of killing, yet now you’ve got blood on your blade.”

“I didn’t kill them because I wanted to. It was simply retribution for what they had done.”

“And that gives you the right to decide who gets to live or die?”

“There was a mound of severed heads behind them. I suspect those belong to the people who couldn’t afford the toll.”

“What a hero you’ve become. You’ll have to follow every order I make if you want to receive Dias’ aid to get your job back. If our mission ends in failure because of your imprudent behavior, Vespa, you’d better forget about returning to N Corp, because Dias will sink you to rock bottom and ensure that you spend the rest of your life in misery.”

“…I will keep that in mind.”

Vespa replied as he slowly closed his eyes. Ezra sits next to him,

seemingly lost in thought and fiddling with the plate Vice Captain Yuri gave her. Beneath her feet are bundles of cash that amount to 10 million Ahn, hurriedly collected back from the dead Syndicate member. The bills have smidgens of blood on them, but there should be no problem using it.

“Detective! Maybe we can still use this plate?”

Ezra turned to me and asked.

“There won’t be any problem using it to pass through turf under the Kurokumo Clan, of course. I don’t think there’s anyone that could figure out who killed Vice Captain Yuri.”

“No, that’s not what I meant! Could I get free drinks with this?”

So that’s what she was looking forward to. Where there is alcohol, there is usually snack; it is little wonder that she’s showing interest.

“Sigh… Ezra. You can eat anything you want, alcohol or whatever. With the money Dias gave us, we may very well order food that has never existed before.”

Vespa’s ears twitched slightly. This young man is quite a hearty eater, isn’t he.

“Ehehe…”

“Give me that plate.”

“Okay!”

The word ‘Kurokumokai’[1] is written in Kanji on the front side of the

plate. On the back side is handwriting that appears to be the signature of Vice Captain Yuri. This might be handy later on.

“So, Detective Moses. If I’m not mistaken, the Laundry of Dreams is a location-type similar to my atelier?”

YuRia asked from my shoulder as if the commotion didn’t happen. It seems YuRia has gotten a lot less talkative since we started heading for L Corp’s Nest. Perhaps she has difficulty maintaining the Psychoment. I should talk with her about that soon.

“Could you explain what a location-type is, Doctor Moses?”

Vespa showed interest as well. Ezra scowled at Vespa trying to correct him, and Vespa retaliated with a gaze just as fierce. I can almost see sparks flying from the staring contest.

“Ezra. I don’t care how Vespa refers to me, so don’t waste your energy pointing it out every single time.”

“But…! He’s the newest and the youngest member of our Office…!”

Vespa’s veins pop out on his forehead once again.

“Don’t.”

“Okay…”

Ezra conceded, and I resumed the conversation.

“A location-type Distortion is a certain spot being subject to distortion, as the name suggests.”

“But you described the Distortion as a phenomenon that individual humans manifest. Are you saying that a person can transform into a location?”

“Precisely. In most cases, it takes the form of a place or building that is unable to move on its own. It’s akin to a trap to the average person. You should be mindful of the fact that a location-type Distortion is not the same thing as a Distortion encroaching upon its surroundings.”

“The stronger that encroaching Distortion is, the more warped the area around it gets!”

Ezra chipped in.

“Like she said, the Distortion can overflow, and a powerful one can influence its surroundings if left uncontrolled. That was the case with ‘The Carp’, the most recent case of the Distortion I solved. It was a child who turned into a giant carp. It would generate a pool of depressive water around it…”

“That’s because sadness is most commonly distorted as the form of water!”

Ezra butted in.

“Yes. Melancholy is like water. Perhaps we could talk about categories for such things at a later date. Anyway, a strong Distortion can alter the area around it and become a host to subordinate entities. It’s easy to confuse it for a location-type Distortion.”

“You could publish an encyclopedia of Distortions with all that knowledge.”

Vespa made a sarcastic yet harmless remark. A book. That's funny. I'd be surprised if there's any library that's willing to collect a book like that.

"Yeah, detective! That sounds so educational and fun."

Just as Ezra spoke, the car was slowly brought to a stop.

"Doctor Moses. I'll need you to tell me the directions from here on out."

It looks like we've fully entered L Corp's Nest. Glimpses of buildings can be seen in the mist. This Nest might have shone brightly once, but now it is sunken in fog. This fog feels quite different from the fume that covered the City during the Smoke War. Unlike the smoke that rose to the sky, this mist sinks to the floor like a pool of stagnant water. It's similar to the properties of sorrow we just talked about. Could this be a manifestation of someone's serious melancholy. Regardless, I'm the only one who can find a way anywhere in this thick veil of mist. Or rather, the prosthetic arm Dias gave me will figure out a way for us. I scanned the barcode printed on the report of the Laundry of Dreams as instructed.

'Urban Legend case, the Laundry of Dreams. Guiding to the most recent observed site. Turn right 300 meters ahead.'

A voice came out of the arm. A vocal guide in this day and age? Come to think of it, this may be a more effective method than hologram-based navigations in a fog as thick as this.

"Vespa, follow the instructions of this voice."

The car slowly began moving again. Then Vespa opened his mouth.

“The man named Han Hee-joon said our work is to capture the Distortion. How are we going to seize a location, if I may ask.”

“We’ll shrink it. As I said moments ago, the Distortion will expand and warp its surroundings as it becomes more powerful. In other words, its influence will shrink as we neutralize its power. We will have to weaken it enough to fit in our hand… or at least the trunk of our van.”

This van is no ordinary vehicle. The entire cargo compartment is a massive dimensional bag. Since it was provided by Dias, it should have no problem carrying absurdly large objects. However, Distortions are ultimately people. It’s not a good idea to store people in a dimensional bag. I have no choice but to hope that Dias kept that in mind, and that we can load the trunk with Distortions anyway.

“Do we have to go into the so-called location-type Distortions ourselves, then?”

“Yes.”

“You said that they are akin to traps. There is a risk that we will be killed as soon as we set foot in there, is there not.”

“Distortions are not weapons of murder; they normally aren’t artificial creations with a specific purpose. What they are is a cry for recognition of their mental afflictions. As you suggested, Distortions that harbor a murderous intent may try to kill us. But I can tell if a Distortion has such designs.”

“That means our lives lie in the hands of your judgement, Doctor Moses.”

“Course you should! All we gotta do is trust the detective, bitty baby

bee!”

Vespa popped a vein once again. Ezra seems to be enjoying it at this point. The conversation halted there. Only the mechanical voice of my arm would break the silence. YuRia is being strangely quiet. When I looked to my left, the red teddy bear was lolling on my shoulder. Her synchronization with the Psychoment appears to be unstable as I suspected. Even if the teddy bear were to stop moving, that wouldn’t mean the death of her. Her real body is under the protection of Dou Gui Office, after all. The teddy bear suddenly flinched.

“Huuu… Detective Moses…”

“I see you’re having trouble maintaining your Psychoment right now.”

“Yeah… My consciousness is fading the deeper we get into this Nest, and the thicker the mist gets.”

“Rest up for a while. I’ll keep the teddy bear with me.”

“Thank you… I’ll take a short nap… Have to work like a dog…”

The teddy bear’s voice trailed off as its head was lowered.

‘You have arrived at your destination.’

A large, green neon-sign was flashing sporadically before us. The bright neon light turned the fog around it green.

“The Laundry of Dreams. We’re there, Doctor Moses.”

“Alright. Be prepared, everyone.”

Ezra took her dimensional bag, and Vespa took his sword and harpoon as we got out of the car. I placed the smoking pipe in my mouth. We walked to the entrance of the laundromat. And I puffed out smoke while I closely observed the exterior of the building. The tobacco smoke scattered into the air and became one with the fog.

“Now then… Let’s retrieve the Distortion.”

We entered the laundry of dreams.

- Translation Notes:

[1] “Kurokumo Clan” but written out with entirely romanized Japanese to reflect that it has been written in Kanji. The word “Kanji” is also used to reflect the source culture of the Syndicate.

Chapter 31: The Laundry of Dreams

This is just like solving relationship issues between people.

The joints of the glass door creaked as we entered the laundromat. A spacey and aged washeteria, housing twenty-six front-load washing machines. Faded fluorescent lamps shine over embrowned floor tiles. A few bugs buzz away near the light, and an old pop song is playing from the speaker on the ceiling.

“I assume you deemed that this Distortion is not a threat to us, seeing that you walked into the place willingly, Doctor Moses.”

Vespa spoke, scanning the surroundings with his eyes. Ezra is watching something in front of one of the washing machines.

“A Grade 3 Fixer and their colleagues fell victim here.”

“An Office was annihilated, and people went missing, right, detective?”

“Not for long. They were found in another place, as different people altogether.”

“What exactly do you mean when you say they were ‘different people altogether.’”

“In the most literal sense. Their appearance stayed the same, but inside, they were completely dissimilar from before. No one could recognize who they’d become.”

“Detective! Over here! I found a washing machine that’s running right now!”

Ezra waved me over. The machine rattles, laundry tumbling and spinning inside. I placed my smoking pipe in my mouth. Laundry… Surely it won’t be anything ordinary. Though, it is hard to see what’s inside while it’s running. Yet it would be a pretty reckless move to forcefully stop the machine. For now, I’ll have to observe the place more.

“Doctor Moses. I see a storage and utility room there.”

I puffed out smoke and walked to the door Vespa pointed at. Was this laundromat not a self-service facility? If an owner is present, that will make this a different type of Distortion from what I expected. The existence of a room dedicated to collecting laundry suggests that the owner of the laundromat manually cleans the clothes customers entrust them. However, I don’t see a cash register or any other sort of station that a staff member would work at.

“Vespa, open that door. And Ezra, look around a little more.”

“Roger~!”

Upon opening the door to the storage room, a refreshing scent of fabric softener wafted out through the air. The sight that unfolded before our eyes, however, was anything but refreshing. This is a butcher’s shop. Human skin is suspended up on hangers.

“I see how it is.”

I blew out a puff of tobacco smoke.

Peel off a human’s skin, and wash their inside clean. That’s what this Laundry of Dreams is, typical of the City. Provocative procedure like skinning humans alive or somesuch doesn’t come as a surprise anymore. The next question is its purpose. I have to wonder: does the act of washing signify purification, or does it imply change? I have a feeling that the latter is more likely to be the case. There’s desire to become someone else and stand out among the stereotyped City folk. It should be stronger than the desire to get clean, at the very least. In a coin-op such as this, the act of washing is as simple as putting clothes in the washing machine and inserting a coin. Looking at the human hide that’s hung here, it seems the people who visited this place took off their own skin and left it here. When did it happen? Right after entering the laundromat? After inserting the coin? But wouldn’t the laundry have to be inside the machine first? It’s still a hazy mystery. If this space was deceiving people’s perception, my eyes would have caught the process. I don’t see a sign of such illusion yet. I guess I should investigate the washing machines once again.

“Let’s go back out.”

“Detective! I can’t get the washing machines to work using ordinary coins!”

Ezra, you dimwit….

“Who told you to fiddle with the washing machine? Don’t mess with the Distortion while I’m not around.”

“Okay…”

Ezra answered in a dispirited voice. There are several problems when a person who can’t see the Distortion is involved in solving cases of the Distortion. For instance, they might walk into a gaping mouth full of teeth that I can vividly see, or be enticed into doing something not knowing that they’re being pulled way by shadowy hands. Thus, it takes a person who can see the various sides of the Distortion to aptly handle it.

“…Detective. Would it matter if I got a coin from the exchange machine here…?”

I put my hand on my forehead. Ezra is the type to leap into action before putting any thought into it. I gather my thoughts while Ezra acts. To solve a Distortion, someone has to be a guinea pig. Sigh. Still, the curiosity and boldness of this child is quite a challenge to handle now, even for me.

“Give that to me.”

“Okay!”

Rumble. With a loud noise, the room trembled up and down. The coin slipped from Ezra’s hand while she was trying to pass it over to me.

“Ezra! Grab that c—!”

Before I could finish that sentence, Ezra swiftly moved her palm below the coin. The thing seemed to land on Ezra’s hand, but it won’t stop

falling. It makes a hole in her hand and reaches the floor, as if it has to. The coin rolls around the floor before it falls down the drain.

Clank-

“Oww…”

Ezra groaned, holding her punctured right hand.

“Doctor Moses. Look behind you…”

Following Vespa’s words, I turned around. The door to the storage room vanished. A loud mechanical noise came at a distance. Something’s already happening. The coin Ezra acquired couldn’t have been dispensed from a vending machine for no reason. A coin exchange machine. Something was traded away for the coin. I held the smoking pipe in my mouth. The space is distorting.

“Did the ceiling just switch places with the floor?”

I blew out tobacco smoke. As Vespa noticed, the room is slowly twisting and twirling.

“Detective… Is it just me, or does your body feel icky and stuffy? Ugh…”

Ezra’s body is slowly being filled with filth that resembles viscous blood. For I can see the Distortion, I need quick wits and good sense. I need to be able to tell if what I’m seeing is a sign visible only to me, or a manifestation that everyone can perceive. The answer is in experience. And experience tells me that I’m likely the only one who can see that filth.

“…Detective. Do you remember? I was a coward during the war… I won’t be forgiven, either, right…?”

This topic again. The memories of that day are one of the subjects commonly brought up whenever a Distortion evokes Ezra’s traumas. The memories of Smoke War. They haunt Ezra and I constantly. I’ve become an expert at dealing with such trauma thanks to that. The memories will be unbearable to her, and she will cause some kind of trouble as a result.

“Gah! Away with this dirty body!!”

I heard the sound of something being unzipped. The skin of the human we knew as Ezra was stripped off her from head to shoulders, knees, then toes. The side of a person that no one wants to see. It could only be described as a form that I can’t dare to look at. A heap of desires. I couldn’t stand the sight, so I shut my eyes tight.

Sigh. Ezra…

“Vespa! Keep your eyes closed.”

I bit into the smoking pipe and exhaled a white breath. The room was filled with mist; Vespa’s mind could be affected if he sees her current form. I immediately breathed in, and let out a violet breath. I wrapped the violet whip around the silhouette that I think is Ezra.

“And do your absolute best to stand still. I can’t handle two people doing idiotic things at once.”

“Understood.”

Vespa responded. I got the pattern down. Once the human takes off their skin, they'll put it in one of the washing machines. Then they'll head over to the storage room and wear another person's husk. Wearing the clean and new "clothing", they leave the laundromat as a brand new individual. If Ezra reaches that point, there won't be much I can do; I will be losing her forever. To avoid that, I stopped her in her tracks somehow.

Distortions are solved through contradiction. The deeds that are considered natural and mandatory here must be denied and reversed; making the person wear their contaminated shell back before it could be washed. Such action will weaken the Distortion of the Laundry of Dreams. What can we do to make her put her own skin back on, then? Forcefully put it on her? No. She must wear it voluntarily. She has to wear her own shell, knowing that it's still a filthy husk. That's how we can deny this place.

"This space… Can I not slash it?"

"There's no guarantee that it won't backfire. Destructive measures should be taken as the last resort."

"That means it's not entirely out of the question. I shall prepare myself in that case."

Vespa kept his eyes closed and put his hand on the sheath of his sword. It's a huge relief that he wasn't afflicted with the Distortion's influence. I have no clues about Vespa's past or his trauma. Learning of his past will be a process of trial and error, no doubt. The time will come one day, and it will be unavoidable. I'll have to take my time to know him. That is to say, I know well how to handle Ezra after

spending much time with her.

“…Tell me, do you think your current self is filthy?”

“I got too much blood on my hands… I’m dirty! I hate myself!”

“I like you for who you are, even if you think it’s unclean.”

Forthright, without redundancy, I say out exactly what I think of Ezra straight to her.

“Really…?”

The answer is easy, but it’s always an ordeal for me to speak it out.

“I really do.”

Ezra is conscious of others’ attention, especially mine. I like that side of hers. All things considered, I can’t bring myself to hate her. Ezra is my coworker and subordinate, and it’s my responsibility to take care of her. The mass of flesh that is probably Ezra picks up the smelly, filthy husk, and wears it once more. The laundromat stops twirling and bending, and gradually returns to how it looked before. Soon afterwards, the space begins to shrink.

“Vespa! Get Ezra and shove the hell out of here!”

We quickly sprinted towards the front door. The cold evening air and the moisture of damp drizzle assailed my nostrils. We managed to escape safely. The Laundry of Dreams was behind us, reduced to the size of a small toyhouse.

“Has the case been solved?”

Vespa asked, carrying Ezra on his shoulders.

“Quite.”

“Is it always like this? That wasn’t nearly as dramatic as I expected. I didn’t even have to help.”

“Only because I knew who I was dealing with. That’s why Ezra and I are working together.“

I placed my pipe in my mouth. This case was tame and simple compared to other recent events.

“And staying still was a big enough help. If you were in Ezra’s shoes, I might not have been able to do anything. Besides, the Distortion is ultimately a human affair. Oftentimes, things are covered up, and details are glossed over.”

“That sounds like how human relationships go.”

I puffed out smoke. He’s dead on the nail. This is just like solving relationship issues between people. If I try to ignore the root of the issue and turn away from it, it can be ended on an ambiguous note. In this case, I didn’t bother to understand the cause or process of the Distortion, nor did I try to make the subject understand it. Because it’s not my business… Because it wasn’t necessary.

“Doctor Moses. If our objective was to solve the Distortions rather than capture them, would it be possible to revert that laundromat to a human?”

“It should be. The steps will be more complicated than what we did just now. Are you curious?”

The Distortion is also similar to human relationships in that the problem gets harder to solve if I try to face it directly and bring it to a definite conclusion.

“Nevermind. If it’s something I must know, you will elucidate it at some point.”

I picked up the Laundry of Dreams and stored it in the trunk. At this size, there’s no need to call Udjat to help retrieve it. Vespa laid Ezra on the back seat of the vehicle.

“Did you two participate in the Smoke War?”

“I don’t feel like talking about that at the moment.”

“Understood.”

Vespa took the driver’s seat. I shook ash off my smoking pipe and sat in the passenger seat. Then I manipulated my prosthetic arm.

Beebeep-

“Han Hee-joon.”

“Yes, doctor.”

A detestable sodded voice comes out of the arm.

“We’ve taken care of the Laundry of Dreams, we’re moving onto the case of the Human Thunderbolt.”

“Looks like you’ve solved the case safe and sound.”

“I’m ending the call.”

“Hold on, doctor. Did you meddle with the Kurokumo Clan by any chance?”

“We did.”

So he somehow found it out. He sure is a competent informant, and he’s most certainly going to give me a chewing out for this.

“The Kurokumo Clan is a Thumb subsidiary. I suggest avoiding conflict with a Finger if you wish to complete the mission in…”

As if I’m some kid that needs his nagging.

Beepbee-

The Thumb is decent compared to the Index. At least I won’t be talking to a wall.

“…Doctor Moses.”

“Are you scared that we might have to face a Finger?”

“If we ever happen to confront the Thumb, please let me lend my strength.”

This child has his stories, I see.

“That’s up to me to decide, depending on the situation.”

Vespa seemed to think for a moment with his eyes closed.

“All right.”

The car slowly trudged through the mist.

Chapter 32: The Human Thunderbolt

A purple humanoid form watches us from afar.

The difference in scenery between day and night is small here, but I can tell from the gradually shrinking halo of light in the foggy sky that it's evening. We seem to be approaching our destination. The car shakes pretty badly, running over some form of objects scattered on the road. They're likely corpses. On the way, I read one of the case reports Han Hee-joon gave me. The 'Human Thunderbolt.' Graded Urban Plague. It says bolts of lightning will thrash about in the mist when it's present. The Human Thunderbolt leaves completely charred bodies in its wake, emitting a burning smell. Lightning is an electrical phenomenon. Thus, it's related to hysteria, or neurosis. Sparks fly off and conduct electricity, leaving sharp and tingling wounds on anyone that stands around it. It'll be fast and painful.

"Doctor Moses, someone is after us."

Vespa spoke. I see dark figures running alongside the car through the window. This vehicle most certainly isn't moving at a slow speed.

"Detective! They pulled out a knife!"

Ezra shouted. We will suffer a considerable setback if we lose this car. Dias gave us this van, so it won't break easily. However, we don't know what the unidentified group is capable of. We have to make a careful choice here.

“Vespa. Can you give them the slip without damaging the car?”

“…It won’t be an easy feat, I’m afraid.”

“Then we’ll stop it right away.”

The car lurched to a sudden halt, creating a loud noise. The group surrounded the van in an instant. Is it another Syndicate like the Kurokumo Clan? Whatever they are, they probably won’t stand a chance against Ezra and Vespa. And we’re less hesitant to get violent after spilling blood here once.

“Ezra, Vespa. Get out of the car.”

This is different from the Kurokumo Clan situation. Now, we’re in the middle of L Corp’s Nest, where there are many variables. We have to promptly prepare ourselves for battle.

As soon as I got out of the car, a burning stench struck my nose; might be the supposed trace of the Human Thunderbolt, according to the report. Another particular scent stung my nose: It’s the acidic smell of tobacco. This smell… Those in the know are familiar with it. Vespa drew his hwando right away. Ezra slipped on Allas Workshop gauntlets and cracked her knuckles. The figures in the mist reveal themselves.

The Smiling Faces. They're wearing masks of the Hahoe[1] village. The Syndicate is characterized by their steel masks grinning from ear to ear. They smoke performance-enhancing narcotics from the gigantic pipes they're carrying. We've run into an Urban Nightmare-class Syndicate while trying to solve an Urban Plague case. It's not an unlikely occasion. The Syndicate started out in the east of the City, but their influence has grown over time and now they're all over.

"Are you here to eat us?"

I placed my pipe in my mouth. They can be conversed with at the very least.

"……"

A moment of silence passed.

"Um, detective… Why won't those chatty guys speak at all..?"

Keeping her eyes to the front, Ezra asked me this in a tiny voice. I'm wondering the same thing. They're strangely quiet for how talkative they usually are. There seems to be about seven of them; that's not a small number. The Smiling Faces quietly bite their giant smoking pipes, inhaling and exhaling smoke. I blew out smoke as well.

"…Their movement is different."

They're known for their uncanny ways of acting, but something is particularly odd about this group. They twitch their bodies as if they were wooden puppets. And there are faint sparks of electricity flowing through them…

"They're coming."

Vespa said. Puffing out smoke in the mist, the Smiling Faces commenced running to us. Their massive smoking pipes double as blunt weapons. It also contains a hidden blade sheathed in the bowl of the pipe, sort of like a swordstick. Ezra faced two of them charging at us. One of them swung a smoking pipe in a large arc, and she struck the bowl of the pipe with her fist. It made a small dent in the pipe, throwing the attacker off balance.

“OWW!!! Detective! My fist hurts sooo bad!”

Whining, she accelerated her other hand with the Allas Workshop gauntlet and struck her fist into the chest. The blow sent the opponent flying into a wall. The other one swung a blade at Ezra’s arm. I let out a purple breath to slow the blade down. Ezra took out a Nester hammer in the meantime and hit the aggressor on the forehead. CLANG. The metallic objects rang as they clashed. The hammer got crumpled from the impact. The mask, on the other hand, is intact. Vespa takes the rest of them on the other side. Yellow traces dance in the air like lightning bugs. Just then, Vespa turned to us and pitched the harpoon he’d been carrying at his waist without hesitation. Woosh— The harpoon tore through the air and hit the left shoulder of the Smiling Face standing before Ezra, making them drop their weapon. Ezra immediately took out her Stigma Workshop blade and stabbed it into her opponent. The Stigma blade makes a sizzling sound in their chest. Paying no attention to that piercing injury, the opponent hit her lower jaw with their knee. Those bizarre gestures. The Smiling Faces are being controlled by something. And the Human Thunderbolt has to be the culprit, judging from the purple electric discharges flowing through their bodies.

Ezra and Vespa aren't overwhelmed by the Smiling Faces, but they can’t seem to gain the upper hand on them, either. I drew a deep breath. Seeing how strong and agile they are, the violet whip I usually

wield won't even reach them, let alone keep them in place. I let out a deep violet breath. The pipe morphed into thick chains.

"Ezra! Throw that harpoon at me!"

Ezra pulled the harpoon from the Smiling Face's shoulder. In that brief moment of vulnerability, one of the Smiling Faces smacked her in the cheek with a smoking pipe. Pow! Ezra's head was knocked upward, but she managed to stay upright and tossed the harpoon. It buzzed in the air before landing at my feet. I tied the violet chain around the tip of the harpoon.

"Vespa!"

Vespa recalled the harpoon right on cue. It was then flung with a roar and nailed on one of the Smiling Faces straight away. As the harpoon was lodged in them, the chains coiled around their body. Their movement is restrained, much like a ship with its anchor dropped. The harder they struggle to break free, the harder the chains tighten; the squeezing pain around my brain grows worse, too. The pain is killing me. My head swims, and my mind wavers. However, the chains will disappear if I let go of my consciousness. Ezra didn't miss this chance; she threw a low kick at the hindered target. The attack broke their leg, bringing them down to their knees. Then she manifested Psychoment on her other leg and delivered a kick straight to their head. The cranium was smashed along with the mask. Vespa speedily retrieved the harpoon and hurled it at another one. Vespa earns time with the harpoon, and Ezra lands the finishing blow. At a stable pace, the Smiling Faces are defeated one after another. Before long, Vespa took the head off of the last of them.

"Phew… We somehow made it out alive, detective!"

I nodded, putting my pounding head in my hands.

“Doctor Moses. These were not like the ones I knew.”

“Something seemed to be manipulating them.”

I walked to one of the decapitated heads of the Smiling Faces on the ground, and removed the mask. A grinning face on a burnt head was all there was underneath it.

Light flashed from afar.

KRAKOOM-

A crack of thunder followed it shortly afterward. Suddenly, a stroke of light zipped past us. The light burned the fog in its path. It cleared off mist within a radius of 10 meters. Around five hundred corpses were revealed before us, all burnt to a crisp.

“Detective…!”

Ezra isn’t surprised at the sight of the bodies, but rather by what they’re doing. Every burnt corpse began to move at the same time, twitching and twisting. Could it be moving the bodies through electric stimuli?

There’s corpses lying on the road and bodies inside buildings. All the

scorched cadavers nearby rise and rush at us. The Smiling Faces we had just slain also stood up, lousily folding and snapping their bodies.

“This thing is no Urban Plague.”

I placed a hand on my forehead.

A purple humanoid form watches us from afar. Purple certainly is an uppity color.

“Vespa. Does the Human Thunderbolt appear to be frozen in place right now?”

Vespa carefully squinted at it.

“It’s moving.”

It’s not stationary. The Human Thunderbolt is moving from place to place to send electric currents, controlling the corpses with the stimuli.

“The plan is the same. I stop it in its tracks, and you cut it down.”

“How much time will you need until then.”

“Ten minutes.”

Vespa nodded.

“Let me ask you back. How much time will it take for you to do it?”

“A second is all I ask.”

That’s dependable. Vespa will handle the Smiling Faces in front of us. Meanwhile the living, swarming corpses appear to be regular citizens. Ezra should be able to fend them off on her own.

“Ezra. Protect me, but don’t get yourself killed doing it.”

“Got it! You can count on me, detective!”

Chapter 33: Neurosis

It actively moves around, gnawing at those nearby and steering them.

Neurosis: a spear of stress, harmful radiation, a prison that constricts oneself at the same time, a symptom that exacerbates the more one hurts others; the temperamental cerebral stimuli and irritation are given the physical form of electricity. When that electricity flows through the body, it burns with an uncontrollable wrath. It's not quite explosive; it's sharp, rather. From light proddings to thrusts that create cavities in the mind. Neurosis flows through nearby conductors. It changes the atmosphere of one's surroundings. One's hysteria is poured on others. It gives a false impression that it will make things better. However, it only causes one's own mind to smoulder and invoke impatience. All the while burning others more severely. This property must be understood. An endless release of irritation and anger, megalomania and victim mentality; it actively moves around, gnawing at those nearby and steering them. And it moves fast.

Five hundred corpses are coming at us. They're mere remains of the deceased. Electric stimuli injected into their brains by the Human Thunderbolt command them to move in a purely mechanical sense. The speed of light—the Human Thunderbolt drifts between those five hundred people at the greatest possible velocity. They're in essence biological machines that feel no pain or fear. They can't be considered subordinate entities of the Distortion, either. We have to capture the

moment when it jumps from a scorched body to another. The easiest method would be to let out a pale blue breath, the smoke of death and cessation. But this should be the absolute last resort. A violet breath for a violet being. It's standard methodology to me. How much can I bind? How much with the heavy guilt given to me? The violet memory that strangles my heart and drags my mind to the bottom. This memory must be dredged up.

I led my coworkers to death that day. The human being named Moses participated in the Smoke War as captain of Udjat. Completing the mission was all I had to do. There was no room for interpretation or mercy in the process. To obey Dias' orders. To obey for her dream. I've stained my hands with so much blood in this life—even the blood of those whom I worked with. What I am bearing are the burdens of others, not mine. This smoking pipe isn't mine; it belongs to them. I hold the pipe and draw in smoke. I close my eyes as I draw in smoke. As I close my eyes, they appear. I have to inhale their memories and agony. I need to find a violet memory among the faint yet intense mass. Memories akin to dark thorns; the eyes and gestures that grudge me. My sense of guilt. My guilt manifests as neurosis. I dislike noise. I dislike talkative people. The sound reminds me of the voices that resent me. The sound reminds me of the battery of the war, and it makes my mind bleed. The small grievances and scornful remarks. Exchanges of words full of ire. The barbed words I've carelessly spouted. The days in my life when I pushed someone and drove someone to tears; had I been kinder, had I been more understanding. I didn't look after my subordinates. My eyes were fixed on Dias. Everything that happened in the process were trivial matters to me. In the City where there is no good or evil, I made a distinction: what Dias wishes for, and what she does not. That was the only criterion which severs the good from the bad. So what made me so desperate? I can

hear the cries and screams of my subordinates. I ignored them and went on my way. I shouldn't have turned around that time. Once I looked back, the path of blood I'd been taking was so candidly visible—I couldn't help but cry. Why did I change my mind at the last moment? Why did a sense of altruism for my colleagues bloom so suddenly? I want to give salvation to them—to those who drift in my head. Each time I resolve a case of the Distortion, their screams go silent one by one. But the quiet doesn't last long. Why did I abandon them? Why did I give them that heartless order—lacking even a speck of what could be thought of as a heart—and then come trying to save them? Why did I push them into the maw of hell? I have been resolving Distortions because I couldn't bear to hear those voices blaming me. This is like a narcotic that I cannot quit. As soon as I stop taking the drug that is resolving Distortions, the pain begins to constrict around my head again. This is not voluntary service or charity work; it's only a drug I take to ease my guilt. And yet I have the audacity to call myself detective and ask for payment. The requests and clients I declined—all of this becomes a cumbersome and hurtful chain that stifles my heart once again. This is the chain I wanted to find. I tighten the grip around my mind. The chain can be brought out if I choke my heart until blood and pus are utterly wrung out of it. This heavy contrition of mine—the grudges of the 2142 people I brought to death. However fast and sharp the neurosis of the Human Thunderbolt may be, it won't be greater than the weight and anguish of the chains I feel deep in my heart. I face the reality that everything I believed to be right was simply a childish attempt of self-satisfaction to cut out my neurosis. Humiliation and self-loathing… Vexation and anger for myself… I squeeze out all of it.

I exhaled a violet breath.

The smoking pipe turned into a hair-thin and pointed needle. A strand of thread which is held on the eye of the needle links to my chest, as though the thread were reeled from my heart. This is not just a thread. It's a chain, a shackle.

"We have 30 seconds."

Ezra and Vespa are straining every nerve to hold back the horde of burnt corpses. An abundance of bits and pieces of charred bodies are at my feet. One of those bits crawls towards me with the last traces of electrical stimuli remaining in it.

I stabbed the heavy and sharp needle into the arm of the crawling corpse. In an instant, my violet neurosis flowed through all the corpses at the speed of light.

Every corpse stopped dead at once. The chain moved from body to body and tied them together. The longer the thread becomes, the more my heart bleeds. The sensation of barbed wire squeezing and crushing my brain. I have to withstand it. Not even a second has passed, but so much physical and mental pain is being inflicted on my body that it could end my life.

Vzzz—

The powerful buzzing of a bee.

The yellow harpoon soared through the air and pierced the Human Thunderbolt’s chest as it paused between corpses.

“It is done. Doctor Moses.”

The corpses went limp and collapsed to the ground.

“Detective! Are you okay?!!”

Ezra asked, having suffered many injuries herself. I nodded in response. The work is not done yet. The elongated chains of the mind now have to be retracted to where they came. Brooding over the memories and agony, I slowly pulled the chains back into my heart. Ezra is looking at me with worrisome eyes, but it can’t be helped. No one can help me with this. I have to do this on my own. This is a

lonely, heart-wrenching task. Just as I pulled the final link of the chain into my chest, I fell unconscious.

“Have you come to your senses yet?”

A low, grumpy voice woke me up. Guess I didn’t die.

“…Did you retrieve the Distortion?”

“Yes, detective! We put it in the van!”

“I see. Thanks for the hard work, both of you.”

“Doctor Moses. We’ve encountered a problem.”

“What is it?”

“Well… The car stopped working; it might be ‘cuz of the electricity…”

Ezra said in a worrisome tone.

“We can contact Han Hee-joon and call Udjat over. They’ll repair the vehicle for us.”

My head still feels hazy from using the violet thread and needle. I’m honestly unsure of where I am, and what time it is. Still lying on the ground, I picked up the smoking pipe and drew in a breath.

“Detective… It’s… nighttime…”

“What hour is it now?”

“It’s 3:26 AM.”

“…And our location?”

“Somewhere in the Backstreets, I think…”

I placed a hand on my head, and puffed out smoke.

The Night in the Backstreets. It’s the time of Sweepers.

Chapter 34: The Night in the Backstreets

And no one will open the door for us.

The Sweepers come in three waves. Three waves are all we have to endure.

“Ezra, Vespa. Think you can make it through?”

“…Ehehe. I actually used up all my strength fighting the Human Thunderbolt just before.”

Ezra looked at me with an awkward smile. I reluctantly turned my gaze to Vespa.

“Doctor Moses, you’re currently incapable of combat. And it seems Ms. Ezra can barely protect herself.”

“So, the conclusion?”

“Impossible. We’d be able to survive two waves, I suppose.”

YuRia’s workshop would’ve been a perfect hiding spot, but she’s not up when we need it. I put my smoking pipe in my mouth. Gross noises can be heard from a distance. The sound of the cleaners of the streets. Fierce fights and contemptible murders are a common occurrence in the Backstreets; all of it is wiped clean by morning. It’s thanks to them. The Sweepers clean the Backstreets, which means it’s safe outside the Backstreets. I tapped my prosthetic arm.

“Han Hee-joon.”

The prosthetic arm flashed for a second.

“…Working hard day and night, aren’t you, doctor.”

“Sorry to disturb your sound sleep.”

“Examining your location… You’re in the Backstreets at this time of the night.”

“I’ll get to the point: Udjat. Can you call them here?”

“If it’s to stop the Sweepers, I doubt they’ll be of any help by the time they arrive.”

“Then let me ask something about this fallen Nest. Is the border between the Backstreets and the Nest area still up?”

“I’m sure a war veteran such as yourself knows better than I do?”

“…What’s the shortest route?”

“5 kilometers to the west as the crow flies.”

“…End the call.”

The way out of this situation is simple: We’ve got to get into the Nest. A ruined Nest is still a Nest; Sweepers only clean the Backstreets.

“We’ll travel in a straight line. Break any walls in the way, and cut down any nuisance.”

“What about the car.”

Vespa asked in a low tone.

“We'll leave it here until the night passes. It will be fine as long as we aren’t in the van.”

“Won’t they treat Distortions as humans?”

“Don’t ask me what they think.”

There is no other option. Even if we were to lose the two Distortions we’ve retrieved, saving our lives comes first.

“We don’t have time. Ezra!”

Ezra takes out her gauntlets and hammer, preparing to make way. When it comes to destruction for survival, she should be better suited for the job than Vespa.

“Junior, give the detective a lift!”

Ezra yelled. Vespa put me under the arm. As unpleasant it is, I suppose it’s for the best.

“Here we go, detective and junior!”

Vespa drew his sword with his other arm.

To the west, a brick wall stands in the way. We'll breach this first. Ezra put her fist through the wall. It crumbled with ease. And there is a two-story house standing right in front of it. Just as she tries to break this wall, Vespa stops her.

"Residential areas mustn't be destroyed during the Night in the Backstreets."

"A taboo."

I hadn't thought of the residential area. All of our problems could be solved if we can enter this house. But we need permission from the owner of the home first.

"It's not just a taboo in a Nest. It's a taboo of the City."

That means violating it won't simply end with a taboo hunter or two chasing us. The Night in the Backstreets is a completely lawless hour. There is one exception among this, which remains safe: the residential area. An inviolable territory. The Head of the City doesn't allow this sanctuary to collapse. And no one will open the door for us.

“Detective… What should we do?”

We shan’t dare to commit a taboo that not even the Fingers violate. I can hear three to four people sobbing inside the house. A group of strangers breaking walls and standing before their home would surely be a terrifying sight for them. The sound grew closer. And Sweepers showed up from the mist.

The Sweepers seep into the corners of the alleys like water flowing over a toy village. They go anywhere a path is open. They’re persistent and resilient. They aren’t afraid to die. They swarm their target and cling to them until they’ve been cleaned off the street. If a Sweeper has died, they clean that corpse as well and continue on. Their orange hooks inject whoever they stab with a strange fuel. That mysterious fuel liquefies the victim. The melted remains are then recycled into fuel. Clumps of liquid. That’s what the Sweepers are. Who knows what goes on in their minds. It’s frankly strange that the Head considered those beings to be humans. I’m not sure if they’re even capable of thinking normally.

“Detective! I’ll get ready for battle!”

“Put me down, please.”

Vespa set me on the ground. I bit my smoking pipe. The yard of a

residence. Sweepers squeeze through the destroyed wall. While this wasn't our intention, we've put ourselves in an advantageous spot for fending off multiple foes. Vespa cuts down the Sweepers creeping on us one by one. Ezra uses her fists and hammer. Her accelerated fist strikes a Sweeper in the head, and liquid spouts from the smashed noggin. The same liquid spills from the torso of a Sweeper cut in half by Vespa. And the liquid is absorbed into the bodies of the Sweepers that follow, simply by stepping on the pool of liquid. Two. Five. Ten. Twenty three. Vespa's blade is losing its edge, and Ezra's fists are getting slower. The Sweepers must be sliced into two or blown up in a single hit. They'll recover from wounds left by dull swords and lethargic fists by absorbing liquid from the carcasses of their fallen brethren. I can only trust those two to handle this.

The first wave has died down. The time is 3:40, and the second wave will strike in about 10 minutes. We shouldn't stay here. We need to continue on to the west. However, we couldn't even make 100 meters. I know this won't work, but I have to give it a shot anyway: I knocked on the door of a residence.

"My name is Moses, and I'm a Grade 5 Fixer from Seven Association. Could you please open this door? We just need a place to rest for a short while. There's three of us, including myself."

“……”

The sound of a person weeping came from inside.

“We’ll just take shelter until morning! We can pay you, too!”

Ezra yelled urgently.

“We want to live… Please leave us alone…”

“Detective… I guess it’s not gonna work…”

Ezra said in a discouraged tone. They’re too frightened to be reasoned with. Thus, we have no choice but to start running again.

“What will you do now?”

“We have to move. To the west.”

Vespa picked me up again and ran westward, with Ezra following right behind.

“Let’s jump over or go around the obstacles we encounter from now on. We can’t afford to check if every wall in front of us is part of the residential area in this thick mist.”

This is going to take more time. Vespa and Ezra may be fast, but travelling 5 kilometers in 10 minutes will be a difficult task in their current state. We crossed walls and ran through narrow passages in the Backstreets. This Vespa kid is insanely quick, I must say. He sprints like a beast while searching for open paths. Ezra isn’t falling behind, either. 3:47. Three minutes remain… or not. Time is up.

“Ezra! Vespa!”

Sweepers come in swarms from both ends of the long alleyway. I tapped the arm.

“Han Hee-joon!”

“Yes, doctor.”

“Does this arm have any combat functionalities?”

“No.”

“Then what was your boastful statement of this arm being one-of-a-

kind and expensive about?”

“Because there really is no other prosthetic arm like it. It’s equipped with the technology that allows us to locate you wherever you are. Not to mention its durability.”

I hung up. Swarms of Sweepers throng Ezra and Vespa. The two are slowly being pushed back; it’s like stopping a leaking dam with just a palm. The water is bound to spill sooner or later. To face the Sweepers right after dealing with the Human Thunderbolt’s army of corpses. Talk about a streak of misfortune.

“Detective! I’ll try to keep ‘em at bay! I won’t let any of them reach you!”

Right now, I don’t have the strength to take on a single Sweeper. Ezra and Vespa will survive somehow. I'm completely dead weight this time. I placed my smoking pipe in my mouth. Behind me is the door of a building in the residential area of the Backstreets. If we broke this door and went inside, we might be able to survive the night. However, breaking a taboo of the City is on a completely different level to breaking a taboo of a Nest. The most one can do is delay their inevitable death. Unparalleled force will pursue us. Death comes unto one someday. Perhaps the reason I live is to settle what I started until that moment comes. That’s what makes me want to stay alive. I let out a red breath.

“Doctor Moses. Don’t get any ideas.”

A yellow harpoon knocked the smoking pipe out of my hand.

“I told you that I can stop the first two waves.”

Vespa frowned at me, his body covered in injuries. I picked up my pipe, and knocked on the door behind me. This is the most I can do while the two act as human shields.

“I’m Moses, a Grade 5 Fixer from Seven Association. If you let us take shelter here for a short while, we will give you generous compensation.”

No response again. That either means no one is in this house or they’re rejecting us.

Crrrrrrrruuuuunk.

The old steel door opened with a metallic creak.

“Ezra! Vespa! Get in here right now!”

I shouted at the two.

“Kay! Detective!”

Ezra and Vespa slowly retreated to the door as they took down the Sweepers in front of them. After they entered through the steel door, I quickly shut it. We’re safe now. What a relief.

“Thank you for your kindness.”

“…Moses from the Seven Association, was it? I’d like to make a deal.”

A golden insignia. This is a symbol that distinguishes the Fingers. These dark red coats. They’re… the Thumb. I turned to Vespa immediately, and I shook my head. Whatever story that kid has, this is

most definitely not the time. Around twenty people in red coats are looking at us.

“Let me introduce myself. I am Isabelle, a Capo of the Thumb.”

She ground her cigar into an ashtray and extended her arm for a handshake. I am a Grade 5 Fixer. I have to submit to the authority of a Capo. I lowered my head and grasped her hand without making eye contact.

“Strange things have been occurring in this Nest, as you can tell. We couldn’t acquire any proper info because of all this fog, yet now I meet a Fixer from the Seven Association. I’m such a lucky gal.”

Isabelle handed me a glass of liquor. I poured the drink down my throat. I’ve been parched for a while.

“What are the grades of your friends next to you?”

“This child here is Ezra, a Grade 3 Fixer from Seven Association. And…”

I’d rather not disclose Vespa’s real name and grade. Introducing him

as a Grade 3 like Ezra should be appropriate.

“Grade 1 Fixer. Vespa. No affiliation.”

Vespa uttered, running his hand through his blood-soaked hair. I placed a hand on my forehead. A Grade 1 Fixer is in the same class as a Capo.

“A Grade 1 Fixer… You wouldn’t be lying by any chance?”

Vespa put his hand to the inside pocket of his coat. The twenty Thumb goons immediately pointed their matchlock rifles at us in unison. Isabelle made a gesture to halt them. Then, Vespa took out his Fixer license and tossed it in front of her. It’s without a doubt a legitimate Fixer license issued by the Hana Association.

“It’s a pleasure to greet such a valuable guest. Please feel free to rest up here for a while. Let’s talk more when the sun comes up.”

As soon as she stopped speaking, the goons withdrew their guns. They’re quick to change their attitude when one discloses their grade.

That's what the Thumb is: a gang of mobsters obsessed with class and authority.

"Provide them with blankets and pillows, and show them the room where they will rest."

A couple of Syndicate members guided us. This is a small house with a floor space of 70 square meters. There's no way the Thumb would use this kind of residence as a base of operation. The Thumb Soldatos stopped at the door and turned around to give Vespa a courteous nod. That's a gesture of asking permission from a superior to speak. Vespa returned a nod apathetically.

"The room is a bit messy right now, so we'll clean it up for you."

The Syndicate members opened the door. Ezra frowned when she saw what was in the room. Three bodies of varying size were on the floor. They didn't even fire the guns. They merely used the buttstocks to snuff them out. They occupied a Backstreets residence before the Night came. …The Thumb can get away with it.

Vespa put his hand on the handle of his sword.

I glared at Vespa, shaking my head.

Vespa glared back at me with sharp eyes.

And then he took his hand off the blade.

Chapter 35: This Territory

The thought I had this day became one of my few wishes.

The “respite” of the room didn’t quite feel like a true respite. Waking up in a room that feels like an average living space is almost reminiscent of my ordinary life, though the smell of blood permeating about reminds me of where I am now. Ezra is still sound asleep next to me, snoring away. On the other hand, Vespa is sitting on the floor and gazing at the door, clutching his blade in his arms. I’m not sure if he slept at all.

“Have you gotten any sleep?”

“I had enough rest that you won’t have to worry about my condition.”

“That’s good to hear.”

Knock knock. Someone thumped on the door. Their silence suggests that they’re a Soldato, a class below the Capo.

“Speak.”

“This is Rami, a Thumb Soldato. I’m here to check if you have woken up.”

I turned to Vespa. A Grade 5 Fixer such as myself is not allowed to

mention a Capo's name.

"Is Capo Isabelle asking to see us?"

Vespa spoke on my behalf.

"Yes. She wishes to talk with you over a simple breakfast."

"We'll be there soon."

It's fortunate to have Vespa with me. He'll make our negotiation with the Thumb smoother. I shook Ezra to wake her up.

"Hmnya… Detective… I can go for another helping…"

What a silly thing to say in one's sleep.

When I went out to the living room, plates of bacon and eggs sunny side up were set on a round table for four. And the Thumb Capo, Isabelle, sits at it.

"Please take a seat, Vespa and company."

Isabelle said to him, paying no attention to Ezra or I. We sat as we were told.

"Vespa the Grade 1 Fixer and a couple of Seven Association Fixers. What is your business here? Could you be participating in the struggle to take over L Corp's Nest like many others?"

Vespa grimaced as he speared a strip of bacon with a fork, seemingly

annoyed. Then he looked right at Isabelle.

“I work for Doctor Moses, the person here next to me. I devolve all of my authority and power to Doctor Moses as of this moment.”

He isn’t even trying to hide his irritation.

“…As you wish. I must say, it’s interesting that you know about the transfer of authority the Thumb uses internally. Grade 1 Fixers are truly in another league.”

Isabelle gave her answer as she lit a cigar in her mouth.

“Or perhaps you’re an affiliate of the Thumb?”

Puffing out cigar smoke towards Vespa, Isabelle narrowed her eyes. He glared at her, not budging an inch.

“Let’s not get off-topic. I would like it if we could speak on equal terms. Ezra, clean the table, will you? I don’t think we have the time for a full meal.”

“Mhp… Kay!”

Ezra answered, hurriedly shoving bacon in her mouth.

While Ezra and the Thumb members were clearing dishes from the table, I placed my smoking pipe between my lips. It’s time to negotiate a deal. I’m bargaining with the Thumb, one of the Fingers. No amount of ridiculousness should be surprising coming from them.

“Well then, Ms. Moses, Grade 5 Fixer of Seven Association. Let us speak on equal terms.”

“Gladly.”

The Thumb has the strongest organizational power among the Fingers. It controls a legion of subsidiary Syndicates, and the members of the Thumb itself are not rallied for trivial matters. However, Soldatos and even a Capo being at the site must mean that they’re unable to rely on their subsidiaries. I imagine it has something to do with the fog covering this Nest. The Syndicate’s organizational capability wouldn’t be as effective in this mist that clouds one’s cognition. They’re likely desperate in their own rights in their attempt to make use of us.

“I’m about to offer a deal. I hope you are prepared.”

That’s right. It’s hard to refuse a deal offered by the Thumb. On equal standing, I could politely decline it given enough justification, but they provided us with shelter to survive the Sweepers. We’re indebted to them. I don’t see any justification that could lift this debt.

“Let’s hear the details of your offer.”

I bit the pipe and let out a breath.

“Ms. Moses. First, I want you to give me an introduction of yourself and your colleagues. Although it won’t change the outline of the offer, I might be able to take it into consideration.”

Isabelle filled a glass in front of her with liquor.

“I’m working as the Distortion Detective, or so I call it. These two fellows are my assistants who help me with the job.”

Isabelle's brows twitched. Perhaps the word "Distortion" caught her attention. That's got to be the case. Several sightings of the Distortion are apparently being reported in L Corp's Nest. There's no reason for me to hide my profession. Rather, they'll be motivated to hand over information about the cases of Distortion that have emerged here. If this prediction misses the mark, though, that would mean they're only interested in using us as another pawn for their strife.

"So you're a detective… It's impressive that you've a Grade 3 and a Grade 1 Fixer as your assistants. I'd contact the headquarters and check the facts right away if I could… But I cannot reach the outside at the moment, so I will have to trust your word on this."

Isabelle guzzled down her drink. It wasn't the mention of Distortions that she reacted to, unlike my expectation.

"…I won't pry into it further. There will be bloodshed in L Corp's Nest in the near future. We of the Thumb and our subsidiary Syndicates are preparing for this fight."

"Are you asking the Office of the Distortion Detective to join your forces as part of the deal?"

"We aren't looking for soldiers to fight alongside us in an all-out war, no. The workshops in this Nest which were supposed to provide the Thumb with musket ammunition have disappeared."

There was a spark in Ezra's eyes. It's only natural that bringing up workshops would draw her interest. The workshops that supply their goods to the Thumb must be especially intriguing, since it's difficult to normally get in touch with them.

"And you want us to find their whereabouts."

I held my pipe between my lips. Isabelle nodded.

“If this is your offer, what do you promise to give us in return?”

“Is there anything you want?”

I need information—information regarding the Distortions. The Thumb will serve as a reliable network.

“We’ll need information on the Distortion phenomenon occurring in this Nest, and we need lots of it.”

“You want us to regularly update you on the news concerning them, is that correct?”

Isabelle scanned me, Vespa, and Ezra with her eyes.

“Sadly, we’re isolated at the moment. It’s not an easy job to get our comms to work or specify our location in this fog.”

“That means you have no intel you could give us at the moment.”

“For now, no. However, I’ll ask the other Capos when I can contact the headquarters later. I can collect the intel and hand it over to you then. How does that sound?”

I blew out smoke. Our dialogue was resolved smoothly thanks to Vespa’s presence, and she didn’t ask too much of us for saving our lives. Isabelle offered her hand to shake on it.

“…Tell me more about the case of lost ammunition and the location of the workshop.”

I shook her hand.

The street is brighter than it was at night, although the scenery is still rather dim and blurry thanks to the fog. We're heading in the general direction of the workshop Isabelle told us about. Ezra walks with a spring to her step, possibly because she's elated for the chance to see a workshop partnered with the Thumb. Vespa follows us, wearing a frown. That kid certainly seems to have a deeply ill-fated relationship with the Thumb, and for reasons I'm not yet aware of.

"Ezra. Do you know much about the workshops the Thumb gets service from?"

"Yep! Of course!"

Ezra's expression was that of someone begging to be asked more questions; it's true that I know little about the Thumb beyond common knowledge. There has been a particular lack of friction with the Syndicate while going about this job in general.

"So Ezra, could you brief us on what you know?"

"As you're already aware, the Thumb uses muskets!"

"Right."

"And the Thumb uses a huge variety of bullets. They pick the right ones for the situation every time."

"I'm guessing those bullets are quite pricey."

“Oh, it’s no joke! It’s like they throw money at their workshops when a purge happens.”

Vespa’s brow furrowed upon hearing the word ‘purge’. He must have a troubled past concerning the Thumb’s purge.

“They don’t waste their ammo on trivial stuff, though. In fact, the Thumb’s firearms are terrific weapons even without the bullets. The buttstock performs better than your average blunt instruments. It’s made of the hardest wood available in the City!”

Ezra tirelessly goes on with her passionate speech.

“It might look simple at a glance, but it contains the technologies of several workshops. Acceleration and mass manipulation are a given! They can purge anybody they want for a reason. The buttstock is designed to be a good tool for bashing anyone’s jaw, too!”

“…Is it so entertaining?”

Vespa murmured. It would seem all this talk of the Thumb provoked him.

“Huh? Well yeah, talking about workshops is always fun!”

”Have you been struck by the buttstock yourself…”

Vespa gave Ezra a vicious glare. His eyes are much like those I saw plenty of times throughout my life. Ezra’s expression changed in the blink of an eye. The same expression she wore during the war.

“What are those eyes...?”

“Ms. Ezra. I want you to refrain from talking about such things while I am around. Lest I cut your tongue off.”

Vespa grabbed the hilt of the sword at his side.

“Don’t you give that kind of look in front of the detective.”

Ezra spoke in a glacial voice. I placed a hand on my forehead. These kids are comparable to ticking time bombs.

“The detective and I’ve gone through a war. It was a hellish time, worse than anything you’ve ever experienced.”

A flash of yellow light danced in the air.

“What do you know about me?”

Vespa’s sword was drawn before I noticed.

“I don’t give a damn about that. Just don’t evoke the memories of war for the detective… for us, with those eyes.”

Ezra doesn’t move a muscle.

“How can you talk about killing people so gleefully when you’ve suffered a war?”

I bit my smoking pipe.

“This is the only way I know to cope: Seek joy. And don’t be serious.”

Ezra’s blond hair gradually turns white. She gripped Vespa’s neck with her hand at a speed my eyes couldn’t follow. Vespa grasped her neck

in retaliation. Both of them are nothing short of killing machines.

“…Ezra. Stop.”

She put her arm down at my word. Her eyes are still cold.

“I apologize. I was careless.”

I puffed out a curl of smoke. Vespa released his grip on Ezra’s neck.

“Vespa. We’re in the process of overcoming our past events in our own ways. I’m sure you are overcoming something of your own as well. We’re coworkers who have to band together whether you like it or not, so I want us all to be more considerate of each other. Understood?”

“Got it!”

Ezra returned to her usual self and gave a cheerful reply.

“Ehehe. Sorry junior! My bad.”

“…You’re insane.”

Vespa closed his eyes and sheathed his blade.

Perhaps Vespa is right; maybe we have gone insane from what we went through during that time. We react sensitively to small things. We’re prone to labor under delusions, and completely nonchalant toward cruelty. I committed a sin, and I must be punished for it. As did Ezra. As did this City.

But I don’t want Vespa to set foot in this territory. He has a good heart. He has a sense of justice in his mind.

The thought I had this day became one of my few wishes.

I shook off the stray thoughts shortly after.

We walked in the mist for a while without speaking.

And we then arrived at the site where the workshop in question should be.

“What a mess.”

A scene littered with corpses came into our sight. It’s hard to tell if they’re Fixers or Syndicate members. I placed my smoking pipe in my mouth. Among them, dark blue coats and yellow garments attracted my eyes. It’s the Zwei, the Association that specializes in public security and protection. Unidentified bodies, accompanied by those of Zwei Fixers. I should investigate the scene further. My lips firmly held the pipe.

Chapter 36: The Bullet

It rotates, digging into Ezra's chest ever so slowly.

There are bullet holes in some of the corpses. These bodies are in the attire of the Zwei Association. And I suspect that they belong to a fairly eminent Section. I searched the body of one Zwei Association Fixer, looking for something a Fixer would carry. I found a Fixer license in their inside pocket. It says they're from Section 3 of the southern branch of the Zwei Association, just as I predicted. This rectangular ID card proving one's status as a Fixer is what tells them apart from Syndicate members. If someone fixes and solves problems for a price without a Fixer license, you have yourself a Syndicate. This is the line between us and them. I inspect the bodies next. A bullet to the chest punctured their hearts and went straight out the back. And all of their faces were contorted, tears streaming.

"Ezra. Are the Thumb's bullets powerful enough to penetrate the coats that the Section 3 of the Zwei have with such ease?"

"Hmmm… It's possible in theory, but this case is kinda iffy. Bullets used by the highest of higher-ups are super expensive and powerful, so they could make a hole in those coats. The thing is…"

"It's unlikely for such superior personnel to be in a place like this."

I gave a light chomp to my smoking pipe.

“Could this workshop be a place where bullets for the top brass are manufactured?”

“Well, all the workshop owners said the ammunition of the Thumb is produced at the Thumb HQ, and kept under strict management when I asked them.”

Ezra says with a puzzled look. I searched the coat some more.

“…I see.”

The scratches on this coat, and the bullets scattered on the floor. I picked up one of them.

“Is this bullet the kind used by the Thumb, then?”

“It is.”

Vespa gave the answer instead. I ruminated my pipe.

“A battle broke out between the Zwei Association and someone who took the Thumb’s bullets. However, those bullets were not responsible for the deaths of the seven Fixers from Zwei Section 3.”

“Detective! The other corpses don’t look like Fixers. Maybe they were part of a Thumb subsidiary Syndicate guarding this workshop?”

I walked toward Ezra and glanced at the bodies. Their limbs were lopped off by large weapons. This is the Zwei Association’s work. Their enormous swords have caused this damage.

“The Zwei’s Section 3 and a Thumb-affiliated Syndicate had a fight; the Zwei came out on top.”

“But…”

“Right. There was someone else.”

I let some smoke seep out of my lungs.

“Whew~ Looks like we have some new faces here. Judging by your appearance, are you Fixers on a request?”

A voice came from the mist. It’s the voice of a young male. He must be the one who killed the Fixers from the Zwei. A man with ammunition capable of penetrating the coat worn by Section 3 of the Zwei is a considerable threat, even for Ezra and Vespa. We have to react immediately; he can see us through this mist. He has us at vantage in terms of sight.

“Ezra.”

She nodded and put on a gauntlet of the Windvalley Workshop.

“Gale fist!”

As she lunged her fist forward, a strong gust of wind cleared the mist in its way. Vespa threw his yellow harpoon without delay. It took little time for the mist to obscure our sight again.

“UGH!!!”

It’s a hit. We walked in the direction of the moan.

“Excuse me, isn’t this rather harsh! You can’t just pin a metal stick into a stranger’s thigh without asking…”

I shouldn’t let my guard down, he might not be alone. I exhaled a red breath. The smoking pipe morphed into a sword.

“Are you the one who killed the Fixers from Zwei Association?”

“I did… I had no ill feelings toward them, but they were getting in my way.”

“The way of you taking the bullets for yourself?”

“Exactly~ I am the Marksman of the Mist! More ammo, the better.”

I hear that voice right in front of me. I give Vespa a look; one of us has to turn his flank.

“Ezra. Be on your guard. Vespa. Disarm him, but don’t hurt him too badly.”

Vespa jumped sideways and disappeared into the mist at once. Ezra and I kept advancing forward.

“Huu~ Are you also here for these pieces of metal?”

“Ezra!”

She extended her fist once more. As the mist cleared away, a yellow trace swept the floor. Vespa seems to be going for the legs. And something was cut by his blade.

“It's a decoy.”

He spoke in a low voice.

“I knew it, so you were~”

An old radio was in front of us.

“I bring enlightenment to people. You’re probably thinking that you’re wandering in this mist, like most others. What is truly lost, though, is the mind.”

A voice came from a distance. Ezra shoved me aside forcefully.

BLAM!

Ezra’s movement stopped right as she pushed me. It’s not that she got knocked unconscious or anything; she ceased motion in a literal sense.

“Huhu~ I’m the Marksman of the Mist~ Hold still there, please~”

The voice is coming from multiple directions. He probably has more loudspeaker devices like the radio placed here and there. We can’t specify his location. I’d at least try to estimate his position from the trace of his bullet, but our view is too badly obscured for even that. He has a complete advantage over us.

“I don’t see enough discussion going on in this day and age. The epoch lacks deep conversation. Nobody likes that kind of stuff, because they’ve lost their ways.”

“And you can see us through the fog?”

I shouted in no specific direction.

“Yep, I can see you clear as day. This mist is merciful to those who haven’t lost their way.”

“Way”, he says. He’s the type that talks a load of nonsense philosophy. Tears are falling from Ezra’s eyes, who is otherwise perfectly motionless. On closer inspection, I see a long bullet spinning in front of Ezra’s heart. It rotates, digging into Ezra’s chest ever so slowly.

“I guess it’s too much for the big yellow-haired fellow to endure. I’m sure it’s tough for anyone to endure.”

“…We are Fixers. We’re investigating this place because we were requested to bring back bullets that belong to our client. That’s all.”

“What kind of windmill-tilting to fetch bullets involves harpooning people and trying to chop off their ankles? What happened to the good old way of the Fixer? Aren't you people supposed to recite some fancy creed, a la chivalry or bushido?”

“Will you let us go unharmed if we forfeit our search?”

“Nada~”

“What do you want?”

“First off, tell your other pal on the prowl for me to cut it out. He’s so terrifying, I can’t move a muscle.”

“Vespa! Stop!”

I shouted out to the air. I presume he's speedily scouring every corner of the area right now.

"What do you want next?"

"I won't make it long. You will accept this bullet instead. I'll put a brake on the one that's digging into the heart of that yellow-haired lass if you do."

"I'll accept it."

"Are you going to be okay with that?"

Vespa appeared next to me and asked. I nodded in response.

"An outstanding attitude. Few have managed to withstand my bullet so far."

Tears are still flowing down Ezra's face. The Section 3 Fixers died shedding tears. These signs make it evident that the attack is of a psychological nature, whether it's a Distortion or a Psychoment user. Meaning, this won't be a test of physical endurance. It's going to be a matter of willpower.

"You look like a smart cookie. But you know that intelligence and strength of will are two different things, right?"

His words echo from all over the space. I hear the sound of a bullet being loaded into a gun. I can hear whistles as well. I gave Vespa a look. This is the one and only chance for us to trace the bullet back to its source. I trust Vespa to know the meaning of my sign.

"Good. Stay right there."

BLAM!

I was surrounded by darkness. Why is it dark? It's because my eyes are closed.

I opened my eyes. In front me are a group of people, donning dark coats and slaying others with their blades. Their shoes clack on the floor in synchronized motion as they march on, cutting down whatever stands in their way. People resist in vain with edged objects before their assailants; then their tools of self-defense are cut through. Curved scimitars mow down victims like scythes reaping crops. I looked down at my own body. I’m wearing the same black longcoat as they are, except mine has a special accoutrement added to it. I looked around. A massive and antique gallery. The marble floor drenched in blood makes a vivid contrast with it. A one-sided massacre. I moved my hand to place it on my forehead. However, it touched a cold mask instead. I’m wearing a mask. Upon being touched, it shows the personal information of the people in longcoats, such as their names and age. I rubbed the mask again to turn off the display.

Someone approaches me.

A person in a dark longcoat wearing a golden mask with the symbol of an eye came to me and spoke.

“Captain. We’ve secured Eunice’s family.”

“How many are they?”

“Four, ma’am.”

There could be children among them. My moral judgement holds no meaning, however. We must—I must—act according to Dias’ will. There is no need to bother informing myself of unnecessary details. I didn’t ask further about the family members.

Their fault is that they were an obstacle to the path Dias pursued.

That is enough reason.

“Slaughter them.”

I am Moses. I am the Captain of the Udjat.

Chapter 37: Noise

!@#%@!#$!@#@!#@#$^#$@&

“Hi Moses~! Good job as always!”

“…Dias. Are you satisfied with the outcome?”

“Mmhmm~! All thanks to you, Moses!”

“About this last mission I handled, they were actual Syndicate members, right?”

“Is it really necessary for you to know that much detail?”

Frigid eyes.

“…I suppose not?”

“Right, right. I like your eyes so much, dear.”

Followed by an innocent, cheery smile.

”You’ve done a good job today, so let’s go out and treat ourselves to some nummy food!”

Dias raised me and gave me a chance at life. I was an abandoned

child. Dias was the one who saved me from desolation; she looked after me and educated me. Dias told me to think of her as my older sister. I wish to make her dream come true.

!@#

“Who is this child, Elmuth?”

“She will be the 2,142nd agent of Udjat.”

“You brought a useless piece of meat.”

“It was by Lady Dias’ recommendation.”

I suppose the child was pushed here.

“…Fine. I’ll teach her.”

“Are you going to train her yourself, captain?”

“If it’s what Dias wants.”

I’m not sure what Dias’ intentions behind getting a clumsy kid involved in our work are. I don’t question her, however. Dias is my light.

@!#$!@#

“Hey.”

A dull tone. An attitude that utterly lacks politeness.

“What is it, Ezra?”

“Isn’t killing our enemies all we have to do?”

“Do you have questions about this job?”

“I heard that work here is all about beating foes to a pulp.”

“You also ought to read books and study.”

“I don’t need stuff like that.”

Having a towering physique for her age, the kid said she’s a good fighter if nothing else. The augmentation procedures she received are apparently expensive and prestigious.

“What is your weapon of choice?”

“I’m good with any.”

“How arrogant. You have that much confidence in your own body, huh?”

“I bet I’m stronger than a shortie like you, at least.”

I promptly smacked her in the face.

“There are virtues that people who shed blood in this business must respect.”

Ezra swung a fist at me right away. The powerful haymaker audibly rips through the air. However, it won’t reach me. I kicked her calf in response. She went down on one knee.

“A plethora of procedures are available out there, such as augmenting tattoos, nanotech, muscle-enhancing drugs, and prosthetics. I don’t know what kind of extraordinary augmentations you have—”

Ezra stood up and performed a roundhouse kick, aiming for my head. I effortlessly dodged her attack and nailed a fist in her chest. The kid winced.

“—but I struck your weak point using less than half of the energy you’ve spent. Making sound judgement depending on the situation. Whether you’re a Fixer or a Syndicate crook, money won’t solve all your problems.”

I pointed to my head.

“The head is your most valuable asset. When you think things through, you’ll find opportunities to grasp, even in the most perilous of situations.”

Ezra jumped at me. I tripped her up, and she fell on the floor with a loud noise.

“And remain calm. The head must stay cool at all times.”

Unable to contain her rage, the kid began throwing punches at random left and right. Each time I dodge, an unsuspecting table or wall ends up

taking the blow.

“Besides…”

She swung her fist at me with all her might. The clenched fist fiercely draws near me, causing a shrieking wind. I cannot get out of its way. I have no need to, rather.

“I am stronger than you.”

I stopped Ezra’s fist with a single hand and gripped it.

“Ughh!”

Crack. I could hear the bones in her right hand break.

“I’m teaching you what you need to know to become a proper member of Udjat. Do you understand?”

Still indignant, the kid was shedding tears.

“And next time, call me ‘Captain’.”

!@#$@#^%@^

Several missions went on. The Udjat agents handle their tasks without any one of them falling behind. They do not question a single thing about their work. I remember the name of every single member of the Udjat. To me, they’re my new family. Their respect for me and the

sense of fellowship may have played a part in their willingness to carry out preposterous and cruel jobs. Of course, money would be the most important motivation that allowed this Office to operate in its unorthodox way. With the exception of me and Ezra.

!@#$@#!@!#%^@!^!^@#^!@#

“Captain. Are we Fixers?”

Ezra asked. It seems all the studying gave her a sharp insight.

“We’ve all started out as Fixers.”

“I looked it up, and found out that Udjat is registered as an Office. And I saw that you’re listed as its leader, instead of Lady Dias.”

“She acts as a client giving us requests.”

A massive Office serving one person. That is what Udjat is.

“But, in my opinion, what we do is…”

“Your opinion matters little in this topic.”

We would seem no different from a Syndicate in the eyes of the

unaware.

“Then, what’s the point of the line Fixers are not meant to cross, captain? We cross that boundary all the time. I heard that Fixers are free to take any requests, though it’s mandatory to report their results to the Hana Association.”

I nodded.

“Hana Association reviews the jobs the Fixers handle. It considers promotion or demotion based on those evaluations.”

We are a Grade 1 Office.

“If that’s the case, why won't the Hana Association demote Udjat, let alone expel it?”

The wealth Dias possesses, her unctuous way with words, and her connections. Everything revolves around Dias. Ezra’s eyes were opened. Same as the doubt I feel, Ezra knows that something is off about our job.

“A Fixer isn’t supposed to kill a civilian who is unwilling to fight.”

Dias doesn’t care about such rules. She exploits and eliminates anyone in her way, civilian or not. I get my hands dirty for her sake. Because I believe in Dias’ dream.

Dias' dream…?

For the sake of that dream, we…

The unstable trip down memory lane accelerates and fragments.

Noises and cries fill the reminiscences.

@!%^!@#$%!@#%%#$@%#$@^&#@amp;#$@&@#$%$

The sounds that call me.

$!@#@!#%@#!%@$#^$#@^&@#$%@#$#$@^&#amp;#amp;

The voices that resent me.

!@#%@!#$!@#@!#@#$^#$@&^%&^$%&$%^*%$^($%^(%^amp;%^&^%amp;@#$%@#!$#@!$@!@%@#!%“Moses~!!@#%@# I’ve brought new work for you. $%@#^67And a strawberry cake, too!$%^”@!#$“Okay. What is#$@%@#!%it about@#$%#$@this time?”!@$%@#$^#$Dias$@#$@#!%brought a %$#@^#$ stranger @#$^#$@@#$%with her. !@#$!@% A pers^@#$^@#$%@#$on w@#$%#@$^ith gr#@$%#@$^@#$ay hai#@^&#$^r and$#@%@#$^#$@gre%@#$%#$@^&#$en#$@%#$@@#& eyes. “Hey, why don’t we !@#$!#% try something huge @!#$!@#^%@# this time!” !@#$@##!%^“What is it now? %@!#^!@$@!#I bet it’s!@#$@!#%@#! another !@#$@!#$!@#$!@# odd job.”!@#^%^!@#$“It’s !@#!@$!”!@#$@#%^@^“A war? ^!@#$!@#$What are you…@#$@#%^“But this is !@%!@necessary for $@#!%^!@#$!@ me to become a !@#$!@#%!@#$@#.” @#$%#$@^”You’re on my side, ?@#$@#!%^. Isn’t that right?”@!#$@!#6234!@@#$@^!@“Yes. This must @!#%!@#%@#!%be done for #@$%@#$^#$@^ the sake #@!#%@#% of all @#$%#$@%#@$%#$@ of us.$@#%$#@^!@For you, @#$%#$^ and for my mentor.” #$@%#$@^The person%#@$%#$@%next @#$%#@$^to Dias #@$%@#$^& says @#$%@#$mysterious #@$%!@#%$#@things.@#$%#$@^“…Even @#$%#$@%#@$I can@#$%$#%tell. #@$^#$^$# We’re@#^#$^#@$% no @#$%#$@^#@$^#@$Fixers. #@$%#$@^&#$ We’re^@#$^#$@^#@$just mass^#@$^#$%murderers.”%@#$%$#&^“Did you #@$%#$@^& want to bec@#^$#%#$@%@#$ome a Fi#@$%^#@$^xer?” @#$%#$@^I want^@#$#@%ed to @#$^#@$% dream the@#$%#$@6 same @#$^#@$^#@$dream@#$^#$%#$as @#$%#@$^her @#$^#$@%together. @#$%#$@@#$^I wanted #@$%#$@^#$@ to take@#$%#$6 that path. #$@%$@##

$@6“Your eyes@#$%#$% are@#$^#$@%@# precious to me. @#$%#@$^#$@They always @#$%#@$%#@$have been.@#$%#@$^#$@ You’re#@$^#$@%#$@ my most precious.”%#@$%#$@@”You#$@%#@$^ think of me… @#$%#$@^and us#@$^#$@#$% as tools#$%@#$%#$@and nothing @#$%#$@^#$@more…”%@#$%#$@^“Captain. @$#%#$@&^This diversionary tactic @#amp;@#$%#$@launched with @#$^#$@%342the help of R@#$%#$@^7 @!#$@!#$@#% Corp. will@#$@#!% #$@%#@$6be vital$@!#%for the$%#^#$%!@#$success@#$%#@$^of this operation.“@#$%#$@^#$@%#$@%#$“Noted, #$@%#$@^$#@5Hee-joon.”@#%@#$%#$@6\#$@%#@$I’ll be spilling #@$%#$% yet more blood. @#$%#$@^In the outpost amidst the warzone,$!@#!@#%@!#we@!#!@#$@!#%!@#$!@#set off@#$%#$@%once again.@#$%#$@%$@#%#$@%#$@%#$@^$#@^$%$#%!@^@!#^#@^%$#&%$##$^%#$%$#&@!#$@#!%$@!#%“All of this was #@$%#$^@$@#%@$#an experiment… @#amp;^#@&$#^@#$5You %$#@%#@$^#$ wanted me to #@$%#$@^&$@#^#@$ see all#@amp;#$@@%@#$%these@#$%$#@&&$#@%@#$detestable things!!!”#@amp;”Ezra!^#$^Han#$%Hee-joon!#$@I’ll save you!@#$@!#%I’ll save you two, @#$%@#$%@$#% if it’s the last thing I do!”@#$@!#%^$%$”CAPTAIN @#$%#$@^@#$^@#%MOSES!!!”#$%@$#$@$#^$#@&^@#$%“You know what, ^@#$^#$%Moses?@#$^#$@^%#I #@$^$#aim to be #@$^#$^$#^@#$the Head. @#$%#$@%#$@^To reach those heights, @#^#$@%@$#%@#$a pair of wings would @#$#$@%#$@^be needed.”^@#$^@^$#@^#@$^%#$%^$#%$%^#%$#“DI%@#$%$#@AS!!!$@#!% are %$#$@my#$@%#$^#$dear$#@%#$@^$@#%eyes.”@#$%#$@%@#$I#@$^#$@^#$ screamed.#@$%#$@%@#$^$#%@##$%@!#%^!@###!~@!@#$#@!%@#%%!@#%@#@!#$%@#$%$#

“…I won’t be your eyes.”

I opened them.

The bullet fell from my forehead and hit the floor.

“Vespa.”

I quietly muttered.

A yellow light flashed in the distance.

Chapter 38: The Marksman of the Mist

Even though he has no mouth, I can almost picture one jabbering away when I listen to his babble.

“…Not bad, you actually withstood the test of my bullet?”

The Marksman groaned as he spoke. Vespa subdued the Marksman and made him kneel in front of me. The bullet aimed for Ezra stopped as well. She’s lying next to me, unconscious.

A steam-powered rifle. It’s similar to Psychoment as YuRia described, but this isn’t one. This is a Distortion, one that maintains reason: an uncommon type of Distortion. Usually, Distortions twist into a form suited for claiming and expressing their desires in one-dimensional ways. It’s unlikely for a human side to remain; however, on rare occasions, Distortions may retain their humanity and possess a capacity to plan a way to sate their desires. The sapience does not make them particularly more lethal or dangerous, but it does become a nuisance to deal with. They keep their desires hidden under layers of facade, similar to humans. Even so, it’s still possible to figure out the cause of those Distortions as their thoughts are warped and linear nonetheless. I believe there’s a fine line between Psychoment and Distortions of this type. They’re at the crossroads between making a step forward to manifesting Psychoment and staying as a Distortion, if

I had to guess. I gave a gnaw at my pipe.

“Where are the bullets of the Thumb.”

The Distortion who introduced himself as the Marksman of the Mist had a bundle of lenses for a head. A combination of a large lens and smaller compound ones.

“Somewhere in this mist. By the by, you’re quite the impressive individual, aren’t you? It’s not often that someone survives one of my bullets.”

This man needs bullets. It seems his gun manifested through the Distortion imbues any ammunition loaded into it with his unique properties when they’re fired.

“You have what it takes to stay on the right path!”

Letting him ramble on and on would be a huge waste of my time. I expired a white breath. The white smoke covered his head of lenses.

“What is the meaning of this? Puhaha. This smoke of yours tickles quite a bit.”

I placed a hand on my forehead. Mental disruption won’t work on him. Is this ineffective against sentient Distortions in general, or is he the odd one out?

“What are you doing here, anyway? You don’t appear to be a generic henchman of the Thumb, judging from your noble willpower.”

“Will you tell me where you stashed the bullets if I let this talk go on?”

“Hahaha! I see you’re under the impression that this conversation is a waste of your time. Why do you think that? Is it because you were ordered to retrieve the bullets? But hear me out, chin-wagging with me will prove to be a most valuable expenditure of time. Oh, absolutely. It might even be a chance to realize what you want out of life.”

This is driving me insane. Even though he has no mouth, I can almost picture one jabbering away when I listen to his babble.

“Alright, let’s do it this way then! I’ll teach you one of these two: the location of the bullets, or the secret of this Nest. Which do you want to hear?”

What he uttered was rather unexpected. He mentioned “the secret of this Nest”; it wouldn’t hurt to hear that. Whether or not it’s true, there’s a sizable possibility that it’s not entirely baseless. On the other hand, the whereabouts of the bullets is factual information. And it’s what I need at the moment.

“Location of the bullets.”

“Sigh… Oh you City folk… Alas, you shall find the answer eventually—after circling round and round. The bullets are in the water tank of the building behind you.”

There was genuine wistfulness in his voice. I don’t mind it as much, though. Even if I had to take a roundabout trip, I can start searching for the answer when I need to.

“Doctor Moses.”

“What is it?”

“Someone is approaching.”

Two shadowy figures approach from the mist. Vespa reaches for his sword. I slapped Ezra’s cheeks a few times to wake her up.

“Ezra! There’s no time to be snoozing.”

“Mmmh… Detective!”

Ezra threw her arms around me. The kid must’ve seen a past too tough to bear.

“Prepare for combat.”

The duo revealed themselves. One of them was a person, slightly taller than me—though he is by no means a tall person. He’s wearing the coat of a Zwei Fixer. It’s worn and wrinkled. The other was a dog made of steel. It’s carrying a crude club on its back. That dog could very well be holding a human brain.

“Is that the one who slaughtered our Fixers?”

He spoke to us.

“Who are you lot?”

The short middle-aged man furrowed his brow, apparently baffled by the inquiry. He then took a Fixer license out of his coat pocket for us to see. Zwei Association, Section 1.

“Edgar, a detective from the major crimes unit of Section 1 of Zwei South.”

The major crimes unit of Zwei's Section 1. Some high-profile individual we have here. I masticated my pipe.

“I want you to hand over that monster, and the Thumb’s ammunition while you’re at it.”

Edgar drew a cigarette from his pocket.

“Putting that aside, Vespa Crabro the Taboo Hunter is here, huh… That’s a rare sight for the southern parts.”

Vespa is silently staring at Edgar. This boy in yellow has a reputation, I see. I feel an uncanny tension in the air.

“Hahaha. Well, isn’t the atmosphere rather awkward?”

The Marksman broke the silence.

“So, is that the culprit who killed our Fixers?”

Edgar tilted his chin at the Marksman. I maintained silence.

“Aight. I want you to stay out of this from now on.”

He’s oozing with poise.

“…What were you trying to do with those bullets, anyway?”

If I confess to a Zwei Fixer that we accepted a Finger’s request, the outcome will be thorny to say the least.

“We just wanted to borrow some of those amazing bullets that the Thumb makes! Hehehe.”

Ezra hurriedly stepped up.

“Really? So you were a group of scavengers looking for some loot to snatch in this aftermath…”

An electronic sound rang.

‘Pzzt.’

“What’s that, Rang? You overheard their conversation?”

Edgar puts his ear to the dog next to him. Ezra gulped. His expression turned into a minor scowl.

‘Pzzzzt.’

“Is that so…”

Edgar threw a cigarette butt into his portable ashtray.

“Fixers bribed into doing dirty deeds for the Thumb, eh? Tch… That changes the story.”

“Wait. I am Moses the Distortion Detective, and I belong to the Seven Association! These are my assistants, Ezra and Vespa.”

“Forget that. Is it true that you’re working for the Thumb?”

“…It is. But our lives were on the line in that deal.”

“Hah… This City never runs short of felonious scum. A Fixer affiliated to an Association taking work from a Syndicate…”

This is troublesome. The problem isn't that we're facing a Fixer from the Section 1 of an Association—the Association he belongs to is the issue. Starting a feud with a Zwei Fixer who works for the safety of the City is essentially opposing the few remaining upholders of justice in this civic jumble. Although it would take some time, the only option we have is to follow them to the station and give our testimony of the situation. Besides, Dias has our back; I presume paperwork won't bother us for long.

"I could cuff you and take you to HQ for formal procedures, but… I'm a stubborn fool."

Dammit… I don't have a good feeling about this. Ezra looked at me with nervous eyes and shook her head vigorously. She's telling me that our opponent is strong.

"Seeing scum like you makes my blood boil. They say Fixers do anything for money these days, but partaking in the slaughter of innocent people, led by a Finger? That's where I draw the line."

Edgar shook his hands. Then his canine companion merged with him, transforming into a suit of metallic armor covering his body. It was as if a shepherd dog assumed an anthropomorphic form.

"Rang, it's time to bring justice."

"Vespa!"

A yellow flash clashed against flickers of an indigo hue. The sharp

blows make a sound that echoes through the street.

“Ezra, we’ll escape. Pick this sod up and run.”

Our best option is to lure him to where Isabelle is.

“…Hey, Marksman of the Mist, was it? Think you can keep him in place?”

“I could halt that man, sure. But… I could also just end up killing him… Or, the bullet might not even work, like how it didn’t work on you. It’s all in the mind.”

I’m forced to make yet another choice.

Name: Vespa Crabro

Age: 24

Gender: Male

Affiliation: Former Taboo Hunter of N Corp (expelled), currently assisting Moses' Office.

Grade: Grade 1 Fixer

Height: 192 centimeters (~6'4" in feet)

Hobbies: Vehicle maintenance, organizing his thoughts while brewing cinnamon tea.

Specialties: Driving, Tracking

Birthday: January 24th

Likes: Foodstuffs (preferably substantial meals), Clothes comfortable for agile activities, Cinnamon, Cars

Dislikes: Cacti, Syndicates (The Thumb in particular)

Name: Dias

Age: ???

Gender: Female

Affiliation: ???

Grade: ???

Height: 171 centimeters (~5’8” in feet)

Hobbies: Collecting vintage tableware, Making punched cards to play with her prized music box

Specialties: Eloquence

Birthday: June 1st

Likes: The sound of music boxes, the color of gold, and…

Dislikes: Dissonant notes, the sound of antiquated machines

Chapter 39: Edgar

Edgar’s determined shout echoed through the basement.

Ezra and I were still running. The thunderous roar of our pursuer won’t get any quieter, despite our best efforts to escape him. This struggle is filled with the sounds of building walls on the collapse, the sounds of swords cutting through the air, and the screeches of metal chafing against one another. Edgar is chasing us, and Vespa is slowing him down.

“Look. Have you still not made up your mind? Just what is the hesitation for? You may be bold in the face of major occasions, but you’re quite the reluctant one when it comes to the little things.”

The Marksman of the Mist says to me, being carried on Ezra’s shoulder.

“This is not a little thing at all.”

Edgar comes from the Zwei Association. Anyone with half a brain in this business knows that there are boundaries a Fixer shouldn’t cross. They’re what differentiates you from a Syndicate crook; violating those rules will result in demotion, or worse, disqualification from work. However, if we murdered a Fixer from Section 1 of the Zwei Association while doing some bidding for the Thumb… disqualification would be the least of our concerns. We’d become the target of

requests.

…No. I know better—that despite everything, this can be covered up as long as Dias has our back. The shallow sense of justice left in me is repulsed by the thought.

…Though, that's not it, either. I'm aware that I've come too far to speak of justice at this point. It all comes down to not wanting to rely on her. Dias is deeply intertwined with every problem, from the cause to the solution, and I hate to see myself continually asking her for help. It's a childish and personal reason. How laughable that I brought up righteousness and conscience as a Fixer for my first excuse.

"…Think you can hit him?"

"You've decided at last! Anywhere in the mist. And whomever you want."

POOM! With a loud noise, Edgar landed in front of us. His armor was riddled with impacts and slices from Vespa's sword, though none of them appeared to have left any critical damage. He held Vespa by the hair with his left hand.

"Vespa Crabro… You're tough, but you lack experience. I can sense uncertainty in your blade."

Edgar spat as he slammed Vespa to the ground.

"Shoot him."

The Marksman of the Mist pulled the trigger right on cue. The bullet was aimed for the center of Edgar's forehead. He easily dodged the shot by tilting it to the side.

“Using cheap little tactics, aren’t ya.”

Said a deep voice. Then Edgar swung his fist at me.

“DETECTIVE!!!”

At that moment, Ezra tossed the Marksman into the air and stopped that fist with both hands. Another shockwave shook the street. Crackle. Crunch. Ezra’s arms broke from the overwhelming impact. She coughed up blood and fell on her knees. He clenched his fist and extended his arm once more. An attack with murderous intent. He’s trying to kill me with this fist. I kept my eyes open and looked straight into him. His fist did not reach me.

“Haha! Anywhere and whomever you desire! My bullet circled round and round and eventually reached you!”

The bullet struck Edgar’s head from the back. It rotates where it landed, to be precise. Just like that, Edgar came to a halt.

“Phew…”

I caught my breath. It was one of the few moments in my life when I was ready to accept my doom.

“Ezra? Can you stand up?”

“This isn’t a big deal.“

The first aid kit in Ezra’s dimensional bag should be enough to take care of a broken arm. However, as it is a limited resource, I feel rather hesitant to use it right away. Vespa is unconscious on the ground, wounded and bruised.

“We should sort this out. Hey, how long does your bullet keep a person frozen?”

“That depends on the person. You, for one, overcame it with much haste and elegance.”

“Is it okay to move a person in this state?”

“Well, I don’t see it being an issue. Not that I made such an attempt before.”

Ezra can’t use her arms due to injury. I tapped Vespa on the cheek a few times to wake him up. He let out a faint groan as his eyes opened slightly.

“…Have you taken care of him?”

“For now.”

Vespa got up, running his hand through his hair. He looked at me, then at Ezra and the Marksman of the Mist, and finally, surveyed the surroundings to get a gist of the situation.

“Let’s get moving first.”

I nodded. Vespa put Ezra on his shoulder and grabbed Edgar at the back of the neck. A small act of revenge, perhaps. The Marksman of the Mist is plenty willing to follow us without any persuasion necessary. We should get to a good place to rest before we take the ammunition to Isabelle.

“No… I’m—I’m going with you!!!”

Edgar’s determined shout echoed through the basement. Then his eyes met mine.

“Rang!”

‘Pzzzt.’

“Well, fuck… Both you and I are captives, huh. Dammit… What happened back there. The back of my head, it aches like hell.”

“Detective! Thank goodness that guy didn’t die, at least!”

“Amazing! Another who possesses a spirit of steel! How serendipitous of me to witness two people triumph over my bullets in a single day!”

I’m sitting on a crate, watching our tied and restrained Edgar with a smoking pipe pursed by my lips. Ezra and Vespa are waiting for my orders at the back.

“You haven’t killed me yet, so I reckon there’s something you want?”

“First off, I’d like to clear the misunderstanding between us, Edgar.”

“If you mean how I mistook you for some small-time lackeys of the Thumb, then you bet it’s cleared, crystal. Congratulations. Killing me would be a huge step up in your criminal career. You’re gonna be real famous among the Syndicates. It might even get you a nice little position in the Thumb.”

I shook my head as I blew out smoke from my pipe.

“Let me introduce myself once more. I’m Moses, a Grade 5 Fixer belonging to the Seven Association. My current occupation is the Distortion Detective.”

“A Detective? Distortions?”

“My work is to deal with the Distortions we encounter in this Nest and retrieve them. We crossed paths with the Thumb unexpectedly. Thus we had no other option but to cooperate.”

“Did you harm any civilians during your little errand?”

“No.”

“Right, maybe you didn’t. You probably thought you could just be on your way after you’re done helping the Thumb. I bet you never stopped to think about the lives of the innocents that would be lost to the bullets you retrieved. That’s what I find unforgivable about people like you.”

“You want to hold us accountable because of that. Why don’t you consider the possibility that we might help more innocent and powerless people after the business is settled? Your accusation is just a delusion.”

“A delusion, eh… Haha, yeah, right. I’ve said similar things plenty of times in my life.”

I inhaled smoke.

“So you refuse to show any understanding for our situation?”

“Maybe I’ll give it another thought when you turn against the Thumb.”

“You seem to think you have the upper hand. You're tied to a chair; your life is in our hands.”

“And yet here you are, trying to negotiate with me.”

He’s an old hand. He must have a rough grasp of our awkward circumstances.

“What would be your demand if that were the case? Do you want the Thumb dead?”

“Yep.”

“…Fine.”

“Aight, then let me hear your side of the story.”

We’re headed to where Isabelle is. Ezra and Vespa are following us, carrying the bullets…

“So you’re collecting Distortions, huh? How many have you caught so far?”

“I don’t think I’m obligated to tell you that much.”

“I know that Distortions have been causing a commotion lately, but I’m not sure if you can just meet ‘em whenever you want to.”

“It’s a trade secret.”

We’re about to arrive at the house that the Thumb took over after murdering its previous residents. Isabelle and her group greet us in front of the house.

“You’re back, Ms. Moses.”

Edgar runs at her as soon as she stops speaking.

“Rang!”

Edgar’s metallic dog once again becomes a suit of armor that covers his body. His ironclad fist struck Isabelle’s face right away. She was slightly knocked back, but retaliated with a knee to Edgar’s stomach. The mutual attack created a bit of distance between the two.

“What is the meaning of this, Ms. Moses?”

Isabelle asks, spitting bloodied saliva. I shouldn’t speak with her. Destroying the assemblage of the Thumbs’ members, with no room for negotiation. That’s the condition Edgar offered. It seems I can’t avoid sinking into pits of violence no matter what I do.

“Ezra, Vespa. We’ll support him.”

We’re facing a Capo and twenty Soldatos from the Thumb. On our side, we have two Grade 1 Fixers, one Grade 3 Fixer, and one Grade

5 Fixer.

And one Distortion.

Chapter 40: To Bring Justice

His movement unfolded before my eyes in slow motion, as if all of it were crystallized within a froz

“Vespa, you’re free to brandish your sword with no constraint this time.”

“I’ve been waiting for this.”

Vespa nodded. I imagine his sword was held back by worry when he was fighting Edgar. The boundaries of a Fixer are no concern against the Thumb, however. Vespa drew his blade and charged into the Soldatos without hesitation. We have their ammunition, and as such, they’re devoid of the means to stop Vespa and Ezra from approaching them. Edgar is in a scuffle with Isabelle. Isabelle’s brass knuckles collide with Edgar’s steel fists, creating noises and sparks that distract my senses. Edgar should be able to handle Isabelle on his own if we keep the Soldatos occupied. The problem is how the four of us are going to take on twenty of them.

“Ezra. We’ll take on three, and leave the rest to Vespa.”

“Got it, detective!”

I bit my smoking pipe. What I can do is let out three forms of breath. Lending a hand with the red breath won’t do much against a single

Soldato. The other options are the white breath and violet breath… Breaking their psyche or tying them down would be a more effective approach. Time will solve this problem. I let out a violet puff. The pipe assumed the form of a whip, and I lashed it at two Soldatos running towards Ezra. How well I can wield a whip is irrelevant. What matters more is the mental image; I have to picture how I will bind them in clear detail. As I do, the whip wraps around the victims, and purple thorns dig into their skin.

"Ezra! Now!"

"Okay!"

Ezra swung her hammer at one of the immobilized Soldatos to crush their cranium. She then swung it at the other, but missed, and they retaliated with the buttstock of their rifle. It turns into a stalemate, dragging on without either side gaining an upper hand. Vespa seemed to be struggling to land fatal blows on the foes surrounding him as well. However, this delay is exactly what we need.

"Anywhere and whomever you desire!"

The Marksman of the Mist has finished imbuing the Thumb's bullets with his power. His shots hit one target after another. Some managed to react, but the bullets take a tortuous route and find a way to get to them regardless. One by one, they cease movement. And the last bullet struck Capo Isabelle.

"That's what got me, huh."

Edgar muttered.

"These Thumb crooks are yours to take care of now."

BANG- The sound of a new bullet hole in a human. The bullets have already begun to pierce those who couldn't overcome the trial. Edgar watches as the Soldatos fall.

"Aight. I'll deal with 'em my way. What about that man you call the 'Marksman of the Mist', then?"

"We'll be taking him."

Edgar made a bitter smile. Then he thrust his arm through Isabelle's head at a tremendous speed.

"So is it just me, or are those bullet holes the same kind as the ones left on the deceased crew from my Association?"

I placed a hand on my forehead. The corpses of Zwei Association Fixers we found in that workshop weren't the doing of the Thumb. That was most certainly the Marksman's work. The decision I need to make here is clear-cut. I can always procure Distortions another time. For that, preserving my life comes first.

"You can have the Marksman. In return, I ask you to stop pursuing us."

"Moses. It's hard for me to tell where you stand. You're acting for a single goal, with no morals tugging at you, good or evil. You're the kind of person who would stop at nothing to reach what you want."

"Are you speaking the truth? Do you sincerely have no need of me?"

The Marksman of the Mist shouted from afar. I only need to take care of the task Dias entrusted me with. That's all there is to it. The

Marksman isn't necessary help for this job.

Bzzzt- My prosthetic arm emits a light.

'Doctor Moses? I get the gist of your current situation.'

It's Han Hee-joon. He's contacting me after all this time?

"I thought communication systems were all busted around here."

Edgar murmured to himself dryly. He must have mixed feelings seeing this kind of technology, given his crew probably had a hard time requesting assistance here.
'Lady Dias says she will have the aftermath cleaned up. I want you to secure the Marksman of the Mist.'

Han Hee-joon has been watching us all along. He's at least seen enough to know the context of the recent events surrounding me. He most likely kept an eye over us when we were being chased by Sweepers, and when we were negotiating with the Thumb. I'm not even surprised. This is how Han Hee-joon works, and what he said just now is a roundabout way of meaning that we are allowed to kill Edgar. It's an indirect order from Dias to do so.

"I'm not going to kill that man."

"Like hell you aren't."

"Ezra! Stop him with all your strength!"

Ezra threw herself at Edgar as he raised a fist and started running toward me. She barely managed to hold him back with the imperfect Psychoment manifested on her body. Her Psychoment tends to be

brought out in rather heated moments, and I have to be involved in it.

"What's up with you, really? Is it money that you're after? No, you're motivated by your beliefs. Not the honest kind, though; your twisted beliefs gnaw the things in your wake. With your half-hearted sense of justice, you spared my life while taking down the Thumb's mooks. But that sense of justice is easily broken as soon as it drags you down. Or maybe your justice was too soft to even break in the first place. … You're a band of scum, there's no doubt about that."

I tensely held my smoking pipe in my lips. As Edgar said, I act according to my beliefs. Atonement. Self-consolation. That is the only goal I need to achieve. Nothing else matters. I move purely for this single purpose.

I took a breath, and let out paleness. Turquoise blue powder covered Edgar.

"Detective!! Why?!"

Ezra yelled at me.

"Thanks for pointing out something I am already painfully aware of, Edgar. I won't kill you for the sake of my scummy beliefs."

"Rang… It's time to bring justice again."

Edgar's armor began to glow, and sparks flew off. It seems he's ramping up the power output of his armor to the maximum. Pushing Ezra away, he bolted forward. His destination isn't me; it's the Marksman of the Mist that he's aiming for. A bolt of blue light dashes across the street. He sprints on all fours, assuming posture reminiscent of a wolf. But he won't reach where he wants to be. The

more he runs, the more the turquoise powder buries into his armor. A temporal treadwheel. Edgar's movement slowed to a near-complete halt.

"Phew! I thought you had forsaken me for a moment."

The Marksman of the Mist descends from the building and comes running. Ezra is looking at me with tears in her eyes.

"You're such a liar, detective."

Vespa sheathes his swords and walks to us. The situation has been handled somehow.

"…No. I can't stop here."

A lens was shattered, sending shards of glass flying into the air. The sound of it came afterward. Edgar's fist had smashed the head of the Marksman. It happened all too suddenly. No one present could possibly expect or react to this. His movement unfolded before my eyes in slow motion, as if all of it were crystallized within a frozen sliver of time, a mere fraction of a second. He thwacked Vespa's sword with a backhand just as he tried to draw it. The sword was pinned into the ground along with its hilt. Then his left fist struck Vespa in the chest.

"Hey, Moses. What did I tell ya? I said it's time to bring justice. I won't let you get away scot-free."

Could this be the side effect of the pale breath? It seemed as though

Edgar stored momentum while his movement was halted. I have never encountered this kind of situation before. There's nothing Ezra or I can do at this distance.

"Is this your definition of justice? Killing people left and right? Do you think you're bringing about justice by murdering whoever seems guilty enough to you?"

"Oh, I do ma'am."

Edgar grabbed me by the neck and lifted me upward. His grip is iron. It feels like he could tear apart my throat at any moment. Even this likely isn't the full extent of his strength. Ezra grapples his arm and kicks him to no avail. He won't flinch at all.

"The Marksman of the Mist is dead, the Thumb's crooks are slain. You know who we actually are, too. What reasoning do you have left, then? Butchering Fixers out of mere spite?"

"Think running your mouth will save your life?"

"I believe I'm describing the situation as it is. What you're doing at the moment is no better than a Syndicate's behavior."

Pzzzt-

"Fucking hell, Rang! I know!"

Edgar threw me to the ground.

"I'll remember you, Moses the Distortion Detective. And your assistants, Ezra and Vespa. I'll be in charge of every damn thing you do in this Nest."

Chapter 41: Hotel Larierre

That social call does not bode me a good evening.

I activated the prosthetic arm.

Bzzzt-

“We failed to secure the Marksman of the Mist.”

‘That’s a shame, doctor. Though, it’s alright. Please continue with your work. And it’s getting late, so you might want to look for lodging first.’

There is no ill will or reproach in his voice. To him and Dias, this is but a small detriment. I doubt they actually thought it was a shame at all.

Ezra is upset with me, and Vespa is feeling powerless. We’re a complete wreck. We’re walking back to our vehicle, dragging ourselves along like soldiers returning home from defeat. Whatever the case, we need the van Dias gave us to retrieve Distortions.

“Ezra. I had to take the option with the highest chance of success.”

“So you gonna use that blue breath every time, detective?”

“No. Only when it’s necessary. And that was one of those cases.”

“Still!”

“…None of us had any other means to stop Edgar.”

“……”

That was the reality. Ezra was weak. Even though she has Psychoment, a power she can’t fully control is still a weak power. Vespa is silently following us, staying out of the conversation.

“Remember, Vespa. Our goal isn’t strength or vengeance. All we should do is find and retrieve Distortions.”

“And that is for your personal satisfaction, I imagine.”

“…Correct.”

We reached our car. It’s thankfully safe and sound. It was provided by none other than Dias, after all. I suppose it’s time to get back on the road of collecting Distortions.

The sun is setting. I suppose we ought to look for a place to stay the night, and with the funds Dias gave us, we could book a seven-star hotel. However, whether a proper hotel is still up and running in this Nest is another question entirely.

“Either one of you have a place you want to stay at?”

“……”

“Ezra, give me a map of L Corp’s Nest.”

Ezra hands me a wrinkled piece of paper after rummaging through her dimensional bag. It’s a basic map that shows major facilities located in the Nest. It lists restaurants, accommodations, and such. The problem is that it’s hard to tell where we are in this mist. That is, if we didn’t have the prosthetic arm to specify our coordinates. I tapped the arm a few times to display our current location and superimposed it over the map. We’re currently quite far from the center of the Nest. Quality amenities and accommodations are easier to find near the center. Hotel Larierre. At least there’s a four-star hotel close to us. It looks like it’ll take half an hour to get there by car.

Even in a Nest whose Wing has fallen, people still live on, and services are provided. Fixers and Syndicates still remain as well. People find ways to carry on with their lives, whether by hiring Fixers or submitting to Syndicates. However, might is more dominant than ever in such places. When residents run out of money, the Fixers will stop providing protection and leave. The Nest will gradually become deserted as people begin to leave as soon as they’re ready to. And there’s no guarantee that someone who once lived in a Nest can migrate to another Nest. Each Nest issues migration permits differently. For some, the only remaining option at that point would be the Backstreets. I imagine the luxury of the Nest life won’t let them easily adapt to the Backstreets. This is not a matter of possibility, though; it’s about survival. It might be difficult to even find a decent area to settle in.

On the way to the hotel, we faced several small-time Syndicates. Those attempting to rob us of our cash and vehicle. Those trying to intimidate us for their own survival. We treat them with blades or

outrun them before continuing on our road. It's a bitter drive. I gnawed on my pipe as we went along.

"Here we are. Hotel Larierre."

"I wonder if it's in business."

"We'll find out once we get in, junior."

After exiting our vehicle in the parking lot, we headed to the main gate of the hotel.

"Greetings, esteemed guests. My name is Rute, the manager of this hotel. Would you like to check-in? Or are you here to assault us? I'll have you know that our hotel has a contract with an Office employing multiple Grade 1 Fixers, so I'd suggest that you want to stay out of trouble."

"We'd like to check-in."

"May I have a look at a piece of identification from your group's representative, then?"

I handed over my Fixer ID card. The manager began to write down the info onto the guest list.

"Ms. Moses, a Grade 5 Fixer. You must've come a long way from the northern side. The WARP train must have cost a fortune, no? I hope you haven't brought along any headaches as serious as the distance

you had to travel.”

“You’re making this long. Are you always this inquisitive about your guests’ business?”

“Please understand. As you know, the current circumstances of this Nest are rather chaotic.”

“Um, do the rates include breakfasts, too?”

Ezra hesitatingly asked.

“Yes, of course. While not as good as before, we still serve delicious meat pies and tomato juice.”

“Ehehe…”

“I’d like to request that the others provide their IDs, please. We used to check only the person representing each party, but as I said, recent circumstances have made our procedures more thorough.”

Ezra and Vespa handed over their Fixer IDs as well.

“Ms. Ezra, a Grade 3 Fixer… and a Grade 1…”

The manager’s pen stopped for a moment. Perhaps he realized that we might be above what his hotel can handle. It’s possible that he lied about having a contract with an Office.

“We won’t cause any trouble. We’ll leave as soon as the morning breaks.”

“Trouble, hm… You never know until the night passes, isn’t that right?”

A voice came from behind.

“Hotel Larierre has quite a bit of legacy. It’s even partnered with the Hana Association. Even though it doesn’t guarantee immediate safety… it’s solid enough to screw over the lives of Fixers like you.”

A hotel that signed a contract with an Association. If a Fixer causes injury or damage with no good reason, the Hana Association will investigate and punish them according to the course of events and severity of the case. Causing a scene in a venue partnered with an Association can be grounds for additional punishment: the offender may be bombarded with penalty points that will accelerate demotions and disqualification.

“I’m Rusk, leader of Rusk’s Office. I’ve been staying here with my crew.”

Vespa turned around to carefully scan the person. If what the manager said is anything to go by, this man must be a Grade 1 Fixer. And other Fixers from his Office are probably somewhere in this hotel.

“Now then, since we probably know what we could do to each other, you can entrust your weapons to me.”

Vespa knit his brow. Ezra held her dimensional bag tightly.

“Detective…”

“Manager. Will Rusk Office keep us safe during our stay?”

“Most certainly. If you’re not a fan of this method, I kindly advise you to seek another lodging.”

“You’re aware that people of our caliber can easily create a ruckus unarmed, aren’t you?”

“It’s still the job of the manager to do anything to minimize risks. How many rooms would you like?”

“…Three of the best rooms you’ve got.”

“Here are the keys to Room 501, Room 502, and Room 519. Our staff will guide you to a unique room you won’t see in other hotels, Ms. Moses. Consider it a special service.”

“Why, thank you.”

“Three suites for one night. That will be 2.45 million Ahn in total.”

That’s approximately 800,000 Ahn per person per room. The price is more or less understandable as it costs a fortune to hire Offices and maintain contracts with Associations. I nodded in approval, and Ezra paid the fee with the cash in her bag.

“And now we’d like you to turn in any weapons in your possession, please.”

Vespa unbuckled his belt.

“Mr. Rusk. Expect things to get seriously messy if you so much as leave a scratch on my blade.”

Vespa warned in a low voice.

“That’s up to your attitude, I suppose.”

Rusk glared at Vespa with bleary eyes.

“Baby bee! That’s not how you ask people nicely!”

Ezra chimed in.

“Please take good care of this bag and that pal’s weapons! They’re super-duper precious to us.”

“I can keep this smoking pipe, can’t I? I’ll make sure to smoke outside.”

“Mr. Rusk, please examine that pipe to ensure that it has no capability to kill. Ms. Moses, may we trouble you for a second if you don’t mind?”

I passed my pipe to Rusk.

“That’s an expensive-looking pipe.”

He inspected the smoking pipe from several different angles.

“I found no problems with it, Mr. Rute.”

The manager nodded.

“Have a comfortable night’s rest, then.”

We followed the hotel clerk into the elevator. Ezra and Vespa went to their designated rooms. Mine is Room 519, located at the end of the corridor. The clerk explains a few things on the way.

“Breakfast is provided from 6:00 until 9:00 in the morning. And…”

“Are there many guests?”

“There are more visitors than you might think. Many guests have checked in to stay here long-term as well.”

That’s fair, this may be a safer option than a common residence in a fallen Nest. Although the price of a single night’s stay will be more expensive than the monthly rent of a Backstreets dwelling.

“For a hotel that has seen an increase in the number of guests, it doesn’t seem very populated. I haven’t seen anyone other than us.”

“Haha. I guess it’s because it’s late evening? Anyway, here we are, Room 519. It’s one of the proudest rooms Hotel Larierre has to offer.”

The clerk opened the door for me, and I slowly walked into the room.

As soon as my entrance was made, I’m struck by the thick stench of blood.

Oh hell…

“Oy!”

I quickly turned my head to see the door slam shut in my face.

“Enjoy your night, milady.”

A creepy voice came from the other side of the door. That social call does not bode me a good evening.

I bit into my pipe to ready myself, looking into the room.

Around twenty people are facing the wall. Blood vessels extend from the back of their necks and converge into one spot. An old woman sits on a leather sofa at the center of the room, connected to those twenty veins.

A Distortion. It’s a Bloodfiend.

“I bid you welcome, Moses. I am Larierre, the owner of this hotel. Perhaps it is no coincidence that you’ve arrived here in front of me.”

Dammit, Han Hee-joon! There’s a Bloodfiend in the hotel we randomly

picked from the map? He's got to have planned this from the beginning, calculating our route. Unless… this really was just an unfortunate turn of events. I still can't help but be skeptical of him, considering his track record.

Creatures of the night. Vampires. Bloodfiends. A stereotyped form of Distortion, similar to merfolk. An incarnation of hunger based on psychological thirst. Various stories of Bloodfiends would be told, ranging from Urban Legends to Stars of the City. I'm reminded of the once-infamous Blood-red Night.

I exhaled a red breath. The pipe assumed the shape of a red sword, which I pointed to the Bloodfiend.

"A fascinating red hue… It's the blood imbued in it that emanates such crimson light."

As the Bloodfiend waved her hand, the blade melted into wine-colored smoke and dissipated.

"Moses… Could you take a moment to listen to what this old lady has to say?"

The woman lifted her arm and waved her hand, raising a red chair next to me. I have no choice but to take a seat.

“That day… Ever since the pillar of light illuminated the City, the times have been changing.”

I held my pipe in my mouth again.

Chapter 42: Bloodfiends

I’ll need some time to reformulate my understanding of the modus operandi of this species.

The Blood-red Night. A Star of the City that made its mark a few years ago. Known for randomly kidnapping people from the Backstreets and the Nest alike, who would later be found as corpses robbed of all internal organs. Those corpses would then come to life and wander, looking for the next victim. The eastern and northern sides of the City trembled in fear of her for quite some time. From an Urban Myth to a Legend, from a Legend to a Nightmare. And soon enough, she rose to be a Star. Multiple Associations and Offices joined forces to study the Star, reveal its true identity, and ultimately slay it. Our Office was part of that collaborative effort. Though, looking back, it’s embarrassing to say that we contributed at all. I never got to see the Blood-red Night in person, and the closest encounter I had was the corpse of a person killed by one of the walking bodies. We were never included in the major missions; I lacked experience as the Distortion Detective at that time, and it probably didn’t help that my response to the situation wasn’t the most professional. Several Offices tackled the menace, but she would elude them every time, only leaving them with living corpses to take care of. Those that most likely did face her were later found dead more often than not. Alas, the brighter a star is, the earlier it burns out. In the end, Charles’ Office eliminated the Blood-red Night with flying colors.

After that case, I began to study more about Bloodfiends in my free time. I encountered a few of them, whom I managed to repel or resolve. The impression I got is that every one of them possessed formidable power, whether or not they were of sound mind. The ones lacking rationality demonstrated explosive physical strength and tenacity, driven by raging thirst; those with reason behave in clever and cunning ways until they're cornered, at which point they will resort to inhuman strength out of desperation. All because of their thirst. There is one thing they strongly crave: blood. It's far from the desire for a good meal. To them, blood isn't something to satiate their gluttony. It's a crystallization of desire. They treat blood like how we treat money. Only that while money is a means for us to afford various desires, blood is a purpose in itself to them. Similar to how humans often become conniving and vicious for money, Bloodfiends are obsessed with blood, and will go to any lengths to consume blood in their own ways.

"What worries would you actually have, other than ways to claim more blood for yourselves?"

I huffed out smoke. The old woman smiled a bitter smile.

"Maybe so, maybe so. Ever since the pillar of light was fired up, our family has been under a threat like no other."

"Family? Is that supposed to be some kind of roleplay?"

"We had to form a community, so to speak. To live long and quiet lives as veins stretched into the night. We used to spend our days in peace.

Although there were a few imbeciles such as Elena… However, after the light was cast, a colony outside of our control emerged."

"In other words, new Bloodfiends showed up?"

"Precisely. They're just like us. However, those newborns are unaware of our rules, and neither do they know how to control their powers."

"Rules? Are your rules there to endorse trapping people in hotels and sucking the blood out of them?"

"Those people won't even remember what happened by the next day. I merely take an adequate amount of blood from them in return for ensuring their safety. We had been living moderate lives until we were faced with this trial. The purity and pedigree of the elders are put to a test…."

"You're Distortions. I don't know about purity, but you can't have any pedigree."

"Distortions, you say… Moses the Distortion Detective. She who sees the twisted minds of people."

"How do you know that I can see Distortions? How did you expect my arrival?"

"…A good friend of yours informed me."

That sod Han Hee-joon must've leaked it out.

"That fellow is more supportive of you than you might think."

“Anyway, that should make this conversation easier. The Distortion is essentially a disease of the mind. You’re nothing special. Distortions that follow a set pattern are especially plain. In that sense, your type is obvious. You’re far from the trickiest Distortions to handle.”

“We’re unique in that we have a bloodline. From the moment we received blood in a certain mansion, our ichor was linked, and a lineage was formed. We have lived in the dark since long before the ‘Distortion Phenomenon’ your kind recently has been blathering on about. We’d been fighting for our lives.”

“Fight? Who is your enemy, then.”

“Your kind, of course. Intentionally or not, we’re bound to cross paths with Fixers and Syndicates due to our nature. We set up rules in order to survive. We decided to settle in each Nest and District. That way, we wouldn’t invade each other’s territories. To uphold this balance, we had to put our kin to rest until the population of each District was small enough.”

“You mean there are twenty-four more ‘elders’ like you out there? One for every District?”

“Yes. And now my position as one is being threatened. The newborns are jeopardizing the balance.”

“Seems to me that your balance wasn’t all that firm if even before that it couldn’t stop the Blood-red Night from showing up.”

“The Blood-red Night… If you’re talking about Elena, I concede that she was our mistake. She was an embodiment of violence, one that even we had little success in calming. I worry that more of such incidents might happen.”

“Do all the employees of this hotel know that you’re a Bloodfiend?”

“Only Rute does.”

“So, who is this supposed menace that’s threatening your seat?”

“Rusk…”

“The Fixer hired by the hotel?”

“Yes. Keeping my enemies close to me makes it easier to deal with them.”

“So you’re saying that Rusk is trying to remove you and take your throne. I could only see an ordinary level of distortion from him.”

A Bloodfiend’s eyes are red. Having red eyes doesn’t automatically make one a Bloodfiend, but the red-eyed trait is an invariable part of all Bloodfiends. Eye color alone does not serve as a definite distinction, especially since eye-augmenting procedures are commonplace in the City. Most eyes equipped with combat-assisting features emit a red hue. However, I can tell the eyes of a Bloodfiend apart from those. The greater the longing for blood is, the deeper and clearer the red will become, exuding a certain scent. A well of blood can be seen splashing inside their pupils. I could not observe such traits from Rusk’s eyes.

“He only reveals that side in his sleep. That might be why you couldn’t see it.”

“Why not strike him first while he’s awake?”

“Were I to fatally injure him, his instincts of self-preservation would awaken his inner beast then and there. It is no use for me to meddle in and make matters worse.”

“What’s stopping Rusk from killing you right away?”

“He isn’t aware yet. He knows not of the fact that I am here, or that I am in charge of this area. Your friend told me that the Distortion Detective is currently on a mission to collect Distortions. Kehehe… I don’t wish to resolve this through violence. I want you to take him with you.”

“You sound rather reluctant to stain your hand with blood for someone who loves to drink it.”

“Rusk and all the Fixers from their Office are Bloodfiends. Although Rusk himself isn’t aware… he turned them all into his kith and kin in their sleep. Or perhaps I should say ‘subordinate entities’ as you would put it? I’ve told you everything that you need to know. I’ll leave the rest to the professional…”

The old woman waved her hand. I was then sucked out of the room and ejected into the corridor.

If what Larierre said is true, then the organizational capabilities of Bloodfiends must far exceed my imagination. I’ll need some time to reformulate my understanding of the modus operandi of this species.

I shook off the dust from my body and stood up.

At least the direction of this matter is in my hands.

I can choose to neutralize Rusk.

Or I can subdue Larierre instead, the lady who is one with this hotel.

That's everything. The Distortion Detective was discontinued after that chapter.

I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did. ;p

If you did, support Kim Ji-hoon, project moon and the community around it.

You're welcome.